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A BROKEN LYRE: HISTORY, VIOLENCE AND ART IN CORMAC

McCARTHY'S *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

MONOGRAFÍA PARA OPTAR AL TÍTULO LICENCIADO EN FILOLOGÍA

E IDIOMAS – INGLÉS

Directora

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Abstract

Blood Meridian is a novel that has become an important referent in the American Literature of the late XX century. The novel depicts a new perspective of the so-called conquest of the West as a devastating landscape full of violence and gore. This study explores the different conceptions of violence which could be inferred from the novel, and how that violence became an object of aesthetic representation. On the other hand, as the novel problematizes history and myth combining historical sources with fiction, it configures a new view of a particular event in American History. Part of the reflection that this paper deals with is precisely how History is conceived and depicted in the book. Cormac McCarthy's style is the catalyst which encompasses all those topics and stories in a superb artwork that unveils a ghastly panorama of a particular moment of the USA's past, creating a new image of it. An image that McCarthy crafted weaving history and myth to produce a new perspective of the Conquest of the West. Thus, this paper analyzes and interprets the possible connections that could be established from the novel among art, history and violence. What McCarthy achieves in that sense, is to reflect upon those issues by re-using the materials already created and a long literary tradition through the aesthetic configuration with which he conflates what the novel is.

Key words: violence, history, Westerns, image, representation, aesthetic

Blood Meridian es un referente esencial en la literatura estadounidense de finales de siglo XX. Esta novela presenta una nueva perspectiva de la llamada conquista del Oeste, en la que ésta se convierte en un paisaje desolador lleno de violencia y sangre. En el presente estudio se exploran las diferentes concepciones de la violencia que se infieren de la novela, como también el modo en que la violencia se convierte en objeto de la representación estética. Por otra parte se estudia la concepción y el modo de presentar la historia, en la medida en que la novela problematiza tanto la historia como el mito por su utilización de fuentes históricas entretejidas con la ficción. McCarthy al hilvanar ficción con la historia y el mito crea una nueva imagen de la Conquista del Oeste. Imagen que nace del estilo del autor que como una suerte de catalizador conecta y abarca temas y relatos en una magistral obra de arte que revela un espeluznante paisaje como parte del pasado de los E.E.U.U. Así, este trabajo analiza e interpreta las posibles conexiones que se puedan derivar de la novela en torno al arte, la historia y la violencia. Lo que consigue McCarthy es impulsar la reflexión sobre tales temas mediante la imagen que ha configurado su hacer estético al conjugar los materiales existentes con una larga tradición literaria para producir así, lo que es esta novela.

Palabras clave: violencia, historia, imagen, representación, estética, Westerns.

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Introduction

Blood Meridian is a compelling novel. Reading it is really a challenge since it gave me no concession, and yet it was clearly an aesthetic experience what I felt throughout the pages, pages that conflated a beautiful and doomed landscape. The novel occurs in the XIX century, on the Mexican-American border. However, its setting resembles more a disastrous scenario where a nightmare is continually played on. This is not to say that the book is extremely dramatic; though full of violence and death, though hideous and ghastly, the way Cormac McCarthy depicts its world is totally anticlimatic. I was truly moved by it.

This long dissertation strives to give a clear notion of my reading, of the reflection I made of the novel and on the basis of secondary sources. It is a personal reading of the novel, and in that sense its contents and conclusions are temporary.

I believe that the novel allowed me to reflect upon History –in general terms, as well as reflecting upon a particular event in American history-, Myth –considering the conquest of the West as a myth, artistic representation, and violence-, of course. All those topics are intertwined; all influence one another to create a particular work of art.

I mainly used the Modern Library 2001 version of the novel. Besides the novel, the book *Notes on Blood Meridian* by John Sepich and the compilation edited by Harold Bloom on Cormac McCarthy were particularly important for the paper. As part of my argumentation I referenced a large number of works by Harold Bloom, Dan Moos, Dana Philips, Stephen Shaviro, Sara Spurgeon, and a lecture by Professor M. Hungerford. I supplemented those with additional sources that gave a theoretical basis for the essay: Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Hélène Poulouen, Susan Sontag, Simone Weil, Jane Tompkins, Mircea Eliade, among others. I should also mention Bakhtin's tenets and Walter Benjamin's theses on the philosophy of history which were considerably important to the overall work.

My intention is to draw attention to some aspects of McCarthy's work, but specially to prompt readers to go to them. I believe McCarthy has produced one of the most valuable novels in our time, so I expect this work would be a reason to approach it.

Justification

Blood Meridian has been considered a ghastly and violent novel.¹ Indeed it is. However, I find that it is also an attractive novel for some reasons that I will try to explain.

Basically, the novel tells the story of the kid: his early wanderings, a bloody and hazardous crossing on the Mexican-American border where the kid joined the barbaric Glanton's Gang, and the final assassination of the kid, years later –then called *the man* by the devilish Judge Holden; hence, *Blood Meridian* gives an account of the kid's life and the events where the Glanton's Gang participates. This brief summary suggests that the novel is not the typical western; in fact, it is extremely different from the figures that almost all of the film industry has constructed. Cormac McCarthy made –apparently– a sort of realistic western where the epic element inherent to those stories, is ruthlessly changed into a story that is like an unending nightmare. This particular fact is one of the reasons that attracts me to the novel: how a traditional story is transformed into another type with different implications. Somehow, McCarthy, I think, was striving to revise– -and to re-create– the myth of the West, which is one of the USA's cultural traditions.

¹ Welsh, Jim “Notes on *Blood Meridian*: Revised and Expanded Edition” pp. 74-75

A second reason that attracts me is McCarthy's *style*. At the beginning of the novel he writes:

Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove.

The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. The father never speaks her (sic), the child does not know it. He has a sister in this world that he will not see again. He watches, pale and unwashed. He can neither read nor write and in him brood already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that already visage, the child the father of the man. (McCarthy, 2001, pp.3)

And in the second chapter we read:

Now come days of begging, days of theft. Days of riding where there rode no soul save he. He's left behind the pinewood country and the evening sun declines before him beyond an endless swale and dark falls here like a thunderclap and a cold wind sets the weeds to gnashing. The night sky lies so sprent with stars that there is scarcely space of black at all and they fall all night in bitter arcs and it is so that their numbers are no less. (McCarthy, 2001, pp.15)

What I like about the novel is the way McCarthy narrates and, at the same time, produces an effect of a repetitive and monochromatic tone, full of coordinated sentences, that somehow sounds like an epic. Moreover, I liked the fact that the novel is just not centered around the events but on this *style*: sometimes the action in the story is so faint -sometimes due to the repetition of the actions- that the focus lies more on the language and the descriptions that this particular language provides, not only of the people, but of the landscape where the story takes place. So the novel does not stand in a progression of dramatic events, because some are described as routines without any dramatic relevance, but the novel stands on McCarthy's poetical mastery.

A third reason is the alluring but also frightening figure of Judge Holden. It has been compared to Ahab, Milton's Satan and Iago². Holden seems to be a supernatural character, full of abilities and utterly wretched. It is as if the Judge handled the threads of the story and its unfolding, like a sort of demigod: even at the end Holden claims his immortality. Probably then, the anti-heroic figure of Holden becomes the disturbing center of the novel.

A last reason –but not the least– is the way the novel deals with violence. It prompted me to reflect on this phenomenon. Here, violence is not depicted moralistically, but as part of the lives that are portrayed. If it sometimes looks gratuitous, it is because it is part of its very nature. The reflection that I made led me to the idea that most of the times there are not necessarily clear causes for this phenomenon, or that we cannot simply reduce everything to one-“evil” cause. Besides, violence has been the leitmotif of a large amount of American and Latin-American literature; in that sense, it is considerably important to notice one point of view where this phenomenon is presented in its bare nature.

Now, I believe that violence is the real axis that articulates McCarthy's revision of the myth of the West –or, in other words, *Blood Meridian*. A violence which could convey a sense of waste, or could be justified as if it were the main objective of man's life. In the end what has acquired “the status of myth”, is actually a long story full of blood and death; one of the

² Bloom, Harold *How to Read and Why* pp. 254-263

& Lectures on Blood Meridian by Professor M. Hungerford.

possible senses of the novel is that the “mythical” foundations –among other of America’s foundations- of a particular society is a prolonged bloodshed without identifiable heroes and villains.

My aim is to describe how McCarthy’s narrative works, and how this narrative serves as a medium to show a phenomenon, violence. I want, then, to focus on the relationships between McCarthy’s narrative devices and the conceptions of violence that are presented in the novel.

Thesis

I hold that McCarthy's aesthetics –in *Blood Meridian*– is a “catalyst” through which different visions of violence amalgamate, configuring, then, a new vision of the myth of the West.

Objectives

Main Objective

- Explain how the aesthetics in *Blood Meridian* relates to the conceptions of violence in order to configure a new vision of the myth of the West.

Specific

- Explain McCarthy's vision of the official history.
- Explain McCarthy's use of historical sources.
- Explain McCarthy's vision of the myth of the West.
- Explain the differences between McCarthy's vision and the traditional vision of the myth of the West
- Describe the two different conceptions of violence presented in the novel: violence as a trade and violence as the human's goal.
- Explain how those two conceptions of violence are articulated in the novel and depicted in its aesthetics.

Limitations of the Study

As my knowledge of Westerns is quite limited, I decided not to focus on this branch of the study, inasmuch as I should read an amount of sources that probably only lead me to assure what has already been assured on the novel. Furthermore, I won't focus on the figure of Judge Holden due to the fact that several papers have been written on him, and as my own perspective does not differ significantly from what has already been said about him.

Referential Framework

State of the Art

Blood Meridian has been object of several studies and books. In fact, it is usually said that the novel is difficult to interpret in such a way that there are books like *Notes on Blood Meridian*, an account of sources and literary allusions found in the novel. Later on, I will point out some of the ideas that John Sepich, author of the *Notes*, poses in his book.

Most of the articles and texts I read about the novel deal basically with an identifiable number of topics: the transformation of the Western genre, literary allusions, Judge Holden's character, how the novel gives an account of history, and, finally, the way violence is depicted. The following are the basic approaches of some of the works that describe, interpret and analyze the book.

Jason P. Mitchell (2000) describes the demythologization of the West in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, and *Blood Meridian*. He points out the characteristics that these two novels distort, shatter, or do not simply take into account. For Mitchell (2000) *Love Medicine* is not a novel in the conventional sense, but "much like Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*."(p. 295); while *Blood Meridian* resembles realistic novels more. Given that, in *Love Medicine* the demythologization lies more in the way her characters –Indian people who are trying to adapt to Western Civilization- live like outcasts, not being able to lead a quiet life. Erdrich shows the disastrous consequences that the conquest of the West left. McCarthy, on the other

hand, demythologizes the West using the traditional conventions of Westerns; Mitchell (2000) remarks that McCarthy even uses the typical subtitles that every chapter of Westerns had. Now, all those conventions are depicted in an unusual way: McCarthy bases his novel as dime novels in some historical facts, but transgressing the myth of the West: for instance, locating most of the novel in Mexican territory is a clear deviation from the myth. Besides that, Mitchell (2000) highlights the presence of violence as the factor that makes *Blood Meridian* an alternative vision of the myth. Violence is present throughout the whole book, a violence which is not justified, a violence that does not divide the population sharply between victims and criminals. One of the apparent problems of the novels, as Mitchell (2000) points out, is their amorality. Nor white people, nor Indians are the “good guys”. The absence of that type of criteria leads Mitchell (2000) to state that McCarthy is depicting a conquest of the West that questions the Official version, and the revisionist version that sees the Indians merely as victims of the wretched white. In that sense, *Blood Meridian* is a version that does not take sides in this particular conflict – supposing that would be possible-. For Mitchell (2000) the amorality in the novel does not imply that the novel would not be a critique of some events in American history. And not only of that, but *Blood Meridian* is a critique of capitalism, since its depiction shows the absurdity of Glanton’s gang activities only leaving death and destruction, making their quest absolutely devoid of meaning.

As many literary allusions are present in McCarthy's work, it is good to note how Professor M. Hungerford interprets this novel as a case of how such allusions determine the content of a book. *Moby Dick*, *Paradise Lost*, and even *The Bible* are referents to understand the very meaning of *Blood Meridian*. An idea probably applicable to almost all literature. For her, the novel is a case of how a writer of the late 20th century understands those traditions, a case that shows how McCarthy has adopted them, criticized them, and in the end, added his own contribution supported by all those who came before him. Hungerford searches out the allusions; for instance, a quotation taken from a poem Wordsworth's –"My Heart Leaps when I Behold" (See Appendix). The verse that is quoted says "The child is the father of the man"; the quotation is almost literal, but in the context where McCarthy uses it, it means something absolutely different: for Wordsworth the child that once we were, is the father of whom we are going to be in adulthood, and if that child dies, it is better to die. Hungerford states that in Wordsworth's poem, "the rainbow" is a reference to the pact that Noah and God made. McCarthy, on the other hand, rejects, according to Hungerford, the late romantics' ideas. What McCarthy sees is that there is no innocence, as the one alleged by Wordsworth, because McCarthy's vision of the world is much more somber and dark. According to her in the end, the novel is not entirely comprehensible if we do not understand the allusion made. Hungerford believes that the novel replicates scenes from these sources to pose a new vision of what those old referents depicted, so that, McCarthy is giving his own version of the topics that other writers have already dealt

with. The contents of *Blood Meridian* are only fully meaningful when it is understood that McCarthy is having a dialogue with a tradition. Thus, what the novel contains is part of a tradition which McCarthy challenges and comments, says Hungerford.

The famous critic Harold Bloom (2000) identifies other possible allusions such as the parallel between Judge Holden and Iago in Shakespeare's "Othello". For him, there is a clear reference between Holden, "the spiritual leader" of Glanton's gang and Iago, in the sense that the "thread of order" to which Holden aspires is somehow similar to Shakespeare's Machiavelli character. Furthermore, Holden is the counterpart of the kid, who, according to Bloom (2000), is going to evolve and confront the Judge at the end of the novel. Thus, the novel would be another way of staging the allegorical conflict between two conceptions of morality. In spite of this, Bloom (2000) acknowledges that McCarthy leaves an ambiguity regarding this "battle". An ambiguity that leads Bloom to make a curious parallel between Holden and Moby Dick, the whale itself: what both entities convey is not completely decipherable.

As another white enigma, the albino Judge, like the albino whale, cannot be slain. (...) McCarthy gives Judge Holden the powers and purposes of the bad angels or demiurges that the Gnostics called archons, but he tells us not to make such an identification (...). Any "system", including the Gnostic one, will not divide the Judge back into his origins. The "ultimate atavistic egg" will not be found. (Bloom, p. 259)

Even saying so, Bloom (2000) assumes that what should be taken into account is the "heroic" combat between the kid and the Judge, the first as a

sort of Prometheus that “may be rising to go up against” an evil “nineteenth-century Western American Iago”.

Now, Holden’s rhetoric is also the basis for Dwight Eddins’ idea (2003) that somehow the novel follows some postulates of Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Even Judge’s rhetoric is for Joshua Masters (1998) a textual strategy by which the Judge controls what happens in the novel. Masters (1998) finds that what the Judge is doing throughout the novel is imposing a way of understanding the world. This particular way of understanding is the myth that colonial expansionists have used to justify their enterprise. Holden creates a sense for Glanton gang’s acts. Unlike the other members of the gang, Holden makes sense of every single act they perform. The sense is that violence is acceptable, since War is life’s objective. To impose one will over the others, which could be read in another way as the thought that leads colonialism and imperialism. Masters (1998) believes, just as Bloom does, that in the novel the kid is the only character who objects to Holden’s ideas. In spite of this, the kid is illiterate, so he is unable to defy the Judge at the end. Now, Masters (1998) arguments his idea on the basis of Holden’s characteristics: his status as what Masters calls a trickster allows Holden to be in an apparent objective position; his wide knowledge allows him to “decode” every single event, to make sense of it; and the combination of those elements make Masters compare Holden to ethnographers; this allows Holden to create a discourse through which the world is understood. For Masters (1998), Holden succeeds at the end; he imposes a rhetoric that also involves a way of conceiving the world.

Dana Phillips (1996) disregards this idea, posing that the Judge's rhetoric is just the empty speech of a braggart. For her, the focus of the novel is the way McCarthy describes events. Phillips (1996) reflects on those descriptions which, according to her, are characteristics of a new type of novel - which does not fit in Lukács' conception of a novel. Thus, it cannot be read according to the theories in vogue, but as a sort of "Pleistocene" novel.

Dan Moos does not go that far. Moos (w.d.) sees in *Blood Meridian* a transformation of the Western that incorporates a new vision of American History. Moos (w.d.) differentiates *Blood Meridian* from the typical Westerns in the way violence is treated: in the latter, violence was a redeeming act with which misdemeanors and crimes were punished, while in McCarthy's novel, violence only led to death, and to certain economical profit. What is behind all the events that the novel recounts is a new logic that has accepted violence as one of the ways of establishing trades. For Moos, then, the violence represented is merely a way of economical exchange: violence is a trade. Considering what Moos (w.d.) holds, one of the key elements to understand *Blood Meridian* is a different stance toward what the conquest of the West really meant. In McCarthy's novel what prevails is a sort of Darwinism, and a capitalist logic that transforms symbols such as scalping merely into means of economical interchange. The culture is subsumed by the capitalistic ideology. Now, Moos (w.d.) quotes Christine Collier to state that in "lower economies", violence becomes the medium of interchange. The bloodletting and massacres were part of a new "game": the imposition of the capitalist system. But besides that, Moos (w.d.)

holds that McCarthy's vision of History is absolutely alien to the traditional representation of the West. Instead of trying to present the typical places, and to give every single event a mood of familiarity -as Moos (w.d.) argues Westerns present their stories-, McCarthy produces an effect of strangeness by being more faithful to historical facts. The use of the language of the epoch -mid 19th Century-, and his meticulous research are some of the features that separate *Blood Meridian* from the traditional Westerns. Hence, the blend of all these elements is going to shape a new historical vision of the West: the place where capitalism was imposed, according to Moos. Still, Moos (w.d.) draws his attention to the way representation is understood by Judge Holden. Representation considered as the one-to-one correlation between the object itself and a surrogate -e.g., a drawing or a book. During the novel, the Judge keeps ledgers where he keeps representations with which he intends to replace the object he draws. Thus, the Judge's enterprise is to destroy the original to preserve his representation of reality. For Moos (w.d.) this way of "operating with signs" -considering representations as signs- is similar to the one described by Jean Baudrillard, i.e. to logic proper of what is called postmodernism in late-capitalist societies. At the end, Moos (w.d.) intends to prove that Holden believes in capitalist logic, especially in terms of what refers to war (violence). This particular point can be argued, as Moos himself remarks; but for him, the Judge accepts the new course of events that has turned violence, simply, into a trade.

John Sepich (2008) publishes an expanded book which gives an account of the different historical sources that McCarthy used to construct the novel. After painstakingly identifying those sources, Sepich (2008) poses some interpretations based on symbols and allusions that he finds with the novel. Actually, *Blood Meridian* is defined by Sepich as a historical romance. In order to reach that conclusion, Sepich (2008) explains how some historical documents became the sources of the novel. One of the main sources is *My Confession* by Samuel Chamberlain, a book of memoirs that tells Chamberlain's version of his "adventures" on the Mexican border. Characters and events are taken from it; in the novel, events follow the ones presented in the memoirs. Besides this one, there are some other sources: History books, newspapers, novels, diaries, among others are presented as the possible sources of the book. The information is arranged by McCarthy and combined with a large number of literary, mythical and arcane allusions that allow Sepich to pose a symbolic interpretation of the novel. Sepich (2008) analyzes and interprets a scene of Tarot reading, to find that this reading discloses the end of Glanton's gang, as well as the conflict between the kid and Judge Holden. In the reading the Fool is related to the black member of the gang, John Jackson; however, Sepich (2008) argues, based on some book on Tarot that the one who interprets the cards is playing the role of the Fool, since it is the Fool the one who is able to do that. If Judge Holden interprets the cards, then he is the Fool. The kid chooses the four of coups that according to some interpretations indicates: "*blended pleasure and success, receiving pleasure but mixed with some*

slight discomfort and anxieties” (Wang 82; original emphasis)” (p. 106). The meaning of the card not only unveils what kid’s destiny is going to be, but the reason why Judge Holden kills the kid at the end of the novel. Glanton chooses The Chariot, a card that disappears while the reading is made; indicating the conned fate of the gang. Sepich (2008) believes that The Chariot also indicates the cyclic repetition embodied in the novel. Glanton’s success will be followed by his fall; Yumas’ victory is just one of the instances in a whole cycle. Hence, the symbols provided by the author convey how the story is going to unravel. Sepich (2008) finds those symbols in different parts of the book as metaphors and other literary figures. Tarot images are not the only ones present in the novel. Sepich (2008) refers to the incredible array of qualities that Judge Holden has and how they allow some to compare this character to the devil. Nevertheless, Sepich (2008) finds that a more appropriate comparison would be to Mephistopheles, in the sense that the novel could be read as a version of the Faust theme. One of the members of the gang, Tobin, tells the story of how they were saved by the judge in a cul-de-sac by his ingenuity –the judge was able to create powder in a volcano crater. A possible reading of the situation is that Holden and Glanton made a pact by which the gang’s destiny would be under the Judge’s dispensation. Sepich (2008) points out that many features by which the devil is identified are present in Holden: for instance, Holden’s ability to undertake any activity he performs and his fondness for playing the fiddle. He even surmises whether the kid’s assassination is not part of the devil’s pact. Still, Sepich (2008) underscores the fact that Holden is a

human character, and that those allusions are part of the cultural traditions that are encompassed by the novel. His most important argument is that Holden's incredible abilities are already part of Chamberlain's *My Confession*. But that is not the only allusion to a mystic system. One of the epigraphs is taken from Lutheran German mystic Jacob Boehme. It presents characteristics of what he calls "the life of darkness". Carl Jung notes that, according to Boehme, "red leads to the region of fire and the 'abyss of darkness,' which forms [its] periphery" (Jung, *Archetypes* 313 in Sepich, *Notes* 129). Red is present from the very title to metaphors in different occasions, red is an ubiquitous color in the novel so that it is an account of the life of the abyss of darkness. On the other hand, the title also includes the reference to the Meridian. The allusion to that meridian is not only symbolical, according to Sepich, but could be suggested in the book *The Scalp-Hunters* where Mayne Reid, the author, identifies the area where the Comanche and Kiowa performed their activities, the setting of the novel. Thus, Sepich (2008) holds that *Blood Meridian* is built on historical account, but always providing a symbolic system that encompasses a vision of the world. That vision of the world is understood by Sepich taking into account the ideas posed by Jung and Erich Neumann –Jung's disciple– in his *Origin and History of Consciousness*. To do that, Sepich (2008) explains how different symbolic patterns are present in the text, given that those patterns represent archetypes. Now, the archetypes that McCarthy would follow, according to Sepich's interpretation, are the ones Neumann and Jung posed: Great Father and Great Mother, as well as Mercurius, Holden, play an

archetypal role in the text. On one hand, there is a Conscious character, Holden, who also relates better to Protestantism; on the other hand, the kid –illiterate– represents Unconsciousness and relates better to a Catholic vision of the world, in Sepich’s interpretation –not only of the novel. Holden’s speeches reveal a broad knowledge and make sense of all the bloodshed and violence which is presented throughout the novel. Sepich (2008) arrives to the conclusion that Holden’s speeches are utterly true; he believes in Holden and makes a very intricate reading of the novel to conclude that *Blood Meridian* is so disturbing due to his affirmation of war as humans aim and destiny, and his denial to pose any possible redemption.

Sara Spurgeon (2008) finds that the novel makes a clear allusion to archetypal mythical figures in order to present a new vision of history by means of a new myth. For Spurgeon (2008), one of the main referents is the myth of the sacred hunter which consists in “regeneration through violence enacted upon the body of Earth”. A hunter kills an animal with the main purpose of performing a rite where that regeneration is enacted. Those elements are present in McCarthy’s novel, though their meaning is absolutely different. The original myth preserves the balance between Nature and Human. What the novel portrays is a world where such a balance no longer exists; there is no regeneration process but a struggle among individuals. Consequently, the aim of violence consists in imposing one individual’s will on others, and Nature –which is not sacred anymore. Spurgeon (2008) holds that McCarthy uses all those elements because the original traditions are still part of the imagery incorporated in texts like

Westerns. American Pastoral and Innocence –represented in the character of the kid, are inherent to this genre, according to Spurgeon. McCarthy uses all those elements with a different purpose: to show the real vision that underlies American society. Spurgeon (2008) identifies different scenes in the novel and compares them with the mythical referents that she believes the novel is alluding to. For instance, in the above-mentioned scene when Judge Holden produces a powder to escape a Comanche attack, Judge Holden turns into the spiritual leader of the gang, according to Spurgeon. This procedure of elaborating this powder is performed as a rite. Each member of the gang should urinate over a mixture that the Judge has prepared in order to finish the new substance that will give the gang their victory. Certainly, the scene has carnival elements that, for Spurgeon (2008), hint that McCarthy is showing that science is being elevated to a “sacred” status. Now, Judge Holden encompasses all the knowledge that an enlightened-materialist individual should have. Thus, McCarthy would be presenting the truly mythic beliefs of American society. Spurgeon goes further: the novel presents the foundations that ideologically support an empire. McCarthy presents those ideas, and at the same time, criticizes them, striving to show then, a vision that unveils the real meaning of the myth: a process where the will of one individual is inflicted on others by force; a process which is destructive and that, unlike the ancient belief, does not try to preserve any equilibrium, or to produce a sort of regeneration. In the beginning, Spurgeon (2008) affirms that “McCarthy is deliberately deconstructing the imperialist aims and justifications of the old myths while

disrupting assumptions about the ideas and identities they were intended to uphold. The result is indeed an indictment, bloody and accusatory, of an American national (ist) identity based on the violent conquest of both racialized Others and feminized nature.” (85)

Finally, some of the criticism that has been made on the novel focuses on violence itself. James C. Gunter (2008) writes a book about how violence is depicted in some artistic works. One of the chapters is devoted to *Blood Meridian*. First of all, Gunter (2008) begins his study of McCarthy’s rhetoric stating that the novel is trying to revise an American myth and in doing so, revising American identity. A revision that focuses on the violence that involved what is called “the conquest of the West”. In McCarthy’s novel, according to Gunter (2008), violence “resists a vicarious traumatic reading, leaning toward an observational, or virtual, reading that distances the reader from the action, maximizing traumatic impact without encouraging mimetic acts.” (p. 64-65). The novel presents violence from a third-person point of view that allows the reader to be a witness of the gruesome events without taking sides. Nevertheless, violence is crude and disturbing, since it refers to the victims as if it were referring to things, and not to people. Furthermore, for Gunter (2008) violence is so striking because it is described as “agent-less”; it has no clear purpose, nor victim. Still, Gunter (2008) finds there are two extremes in the novel: the kid who acts without being fully aware of his actions, and the Judge who uses a rhetoric that makes sense of violence. For Gunter (2008), the Judge represents the dominant ideology which supports all the violence the novel contains, while

the kid rejects violence vaguely since he is not fully conscious of his acts. However, neither one of these two characters are really attractive for the reader; Gunter (2008) affirms that the reader's response to Judge is rejection, as Holden is a grotesque character, even though he is the most skillful character one can imagine. The kid, on the other hand, does not produce many empathetic feelings, given that he has no outstanding qualities. On the basis of those assumptions, Gunter (2008) concludes that people who read *Blood Meridian* would not "mimic" what is contained in the book. But of course, the reader's response is not always easy to predict. One of the interesting points Gunter (2008) emphasizes is that in the end, McCarthy's revision wants to reflect upon what it really means to be an "American". For McCarthy, the conquest of West is a bloodshed where part of the identity was forged, which in turn allows Gunter (2008) to say: "*Blood Meridian* is about the violence inherent in our concept of ourselves - **American people**, (dashes are mine)-, but does not invite repetition of that violence." (2008, p. 91)

Another essay that gives some interesting hints about how violence is presented is the one written by Steven Shaviro. Shaviro (2009) finds that violence is one of the elements that allows McCarthy to depict "the very life of darkness". The images of violence produce a feeling that is described by Shaviro as a "vertiginous, nauseous exhilaration" (2009, p. 10). It is a strong feeling that, for Shaviro, is provided by the following features. On one hand, the book does not give a special place to violence, given that there is no emphasis –morally- on any violent action depicted in the book, or any action

at all. “*Blood Meridian* is a book, then, not of heights and depths, nor of origins and endings, but of restless, incessant horizontal movements: nomadic wanderings, topographical displacements, variations of weather, skirmishes in the desert. There is only war, there is only the dance.”(p. 11). Shaviro (2009) points out that the “optical democracy” is an important element for the understanding of the novel, since there is no anthropocentric center in it. Instead, there is something he calls “open topography”, recalling what Deleuze and Guattari called “smooth space”; so that the novel is constructed following an “inverted circle”, an image that for Shaviro is linked to an image that McCarthy points out during the novel according to which his characters are following a “third destiny” which has nothing to do with fate or will; a destiny that, for Shaviro, conveys the insignificance of human acts. Shaviro (2009) arguably states that there is no authorial presence in the book. The novel’s writing has no subjectivity, since it focuses on an *erotic of landscape*, a sort of zero-degree writing that gives an account of objects and beings as equals. The prose that McCarthy uses centers on objects as well as people in the same way, there is a link between everything, there is nothing more important than any other thing. : “There is only an incessant fluid displacement, a flux of words and of visions and palpations, indifferent to our usual distinctions between subjective and objective, between literal and figurative or between empirical description and speculative reflection.” (p. 17) Shaviro (2009) highlights the fact that there is no dualism in the novel. There is no opposition between things. Nevertheless, as Harold Bloom states, Shaviro (2009) affirms there is a

struggle between the Judge and the kid, which to certain extent should include a certain amount of opposition. Still, the important point here is that Shaviro's interpretation posits that the novel presents an ontological view where there is only one world where things and words –that represent those things- affect each other. "*Blood Meridian* thus refuses to acknowledge any gap or opposition between words and things. It insists that there can be no fissure or discontinuity in the real" (p. 18). Consequently, words and representations affect the reality as much as concrete things and beings.

In that sense, Shaviro (2009) finds that the novel's aim is: "a catastrophic act of witness, embracing the real by tracing it in gore" (p. 18) Shaviro's interpretation concludes that McCarthy conceives writing as an "act of war".

Writing, like war, is a ceremonial and sacrificial act; and *Blood Meridian* is a novel written in blood, awash in blood. Yet for all its lucidity in the face of horror, this is not a book that sets a high value upon selfconsciousness. And for all its exacerbated sense of fatality, its tenor is profoundly anticlimactic and anticathartic. (2009, p. 19)

Shaviro (2009) understands that all the violence depicted in the novel does not produce any relief. In the end he concludes saying: "*Blood Meridian* performs the violent, sacrificial, self-consuming ritual upon which our civilization is founded. Or better, it traumatically re-enacts this ritual, for foundations are never set in place once and for all. More blood is always needed to seal and renew the pact." (p. 20). Then, he holds that American society is founded on this ritual. To finish, Shaviro (2009) highlights that McCarthy's novel is not a gloomy book, it is vital, full of energy and "cheerfulness". Recalling Jacob Boehme's epigraph, Shaviro (2009) notes

that “life of darkness” is not the same as life sunk in misery and sorrow, so that *Blood Meridian* is not a sorrowful book, and perhaps that is why the book is so disturbing.

This short review of analyzes and interpretations that *Blood Meridian* has given rites to gives an idea of how complex the novel is. The recurrent claim of some reviewers and interpreters who read the text as if it were an “apocalyptic” vision of humans is not included. For them *Blood Meridian* is more a dystopia than a historical novel. What such points prove is the wide array of interpretations that a genuine artwork could arouse. Still, this brief collection of ideas it is enough to give a wide perspective of what the novel is, and provides a basis for the present essay.

Theoretical References

The following are some works where different authors have posed conceptions about Westerns, Poetics, Myth, History and Violence. As all these topics are related to *Blood Meridian* in diverse ways, they support and give ground to my own interpretation of the novel.

Westerns have been part of American culture, and have had a strong influence in USA and abroad. A large amount of works have been written about the genre. One of them, *Western of Everything*, is the analysis and interpretation that Jane Tompkins made about the genre and its influence in USA. Her sentimental revision of Westerns is full of subjectivity, and it gives some interesting insights about how this type of texts constructed a set of values, how they constructed models for a society. Tompkins (1992) establishes some central elements in Westerns such as Death, and the way the landscape is depicted in this genre, among others. One of the points that Tompkins (1992) highlights is the fact that the appeal of Westerns lies in being both familiar and at the same time giving the sense of risk, in showing a familiar situation that also encompasses danger. In other words, Westerns blend the need for adventure with the comfort of being safe. Tompkins (1992) stresses that the model configured in Western consists in the exaltation of manhood. The most important is for every character to prove his worthiness: how *manly* he is. It is not strange, then, that women played a very minor role in the majority of Westerns, and that if depicted, they were usually submissive to men. Another relevant characteristic present in Westerns is comradeship. The different adventures create bonds among

Cowboys that turn out to be the most valuable ones they could ever get. A comrade does not betray, a comrade is always trustworthy. Meanwhile, there are some other characters that appear once in a while: Indians. They were usually simply stereotypes in these stories. Tompkins (1992) stresses that they were depicted in movies almost like extras; if they were to play a significant role, that role would be played by a white man. So that Indians were almost like figures painted on the backdrop. They only intervened in a stereotypical way. Of course there are exceptions, and Tompkins (1992) mentions some; however, the majority of Westerns did not really care about Indians. Sometimes they were the enemies, sometimes they were friends; but almost always, they were not so relevant.

One of the most interesting insights that Tompkins (1992) posits is that one of the central elements of Westerns is Death. The actions in Westerns are surrounded by Death in a sense: everything is matter of life or death. If they get lost in the desert, they can be killed by criminals; if they do not handle the gun, they can easily get killed in a shoot-out, and so on. Every single action is lurked by the risk of dying; that particular fact gives Westerns that aura of “transcendence”; the characters are always facing danger. Tompkins (1992) proposes that one of the reasons why Westerns are appealing is that they establish a logic where the ones who survive danger are worthy of life. Now, Death is omnipresent due to the simple fact that in Westerns there is always violence. One of the questions Tompkins (1992) asks is why violence is so recurrent. She supposes that it is partially derived from US history – particularly “the strenuous age”-; although she gives more importance to the

assumption that the genre is a way of controlling violence. Westerns would be stylized ways of portraying –and facing - violence. Finally, she poses that Westerns are the stark response to a type of book that Christian female authors wrote during the XIX century. Books like *The Wide, Wide World* or Stowe's *The Minister Wooing* were sentimental novels written for women in order to praise some Christian values such as submission and acceptance. On the other hand, the Western, for Tompkins (1992), rejected Christian religion in favor of the ideal of the man who, by his own work, by his own action, is capable of taming nature. What Westerns propose is another type of way-of-life model that replaces Christian's models. Both Westerns and Christian's models share the Calvinist idea of hard work, but in Westerns, religion is harmless, useless. A man has to protect himself and that is what Westerns praised, in Tompkins' interpretation.

Besides Westerns, McCarthy also used conventions which are near to what is called dime novels. The name was a brand that identified a series of booklets under the title *Beadle's Dime Novels*. Along with other publishers Erastus Beadle edited booklets which contained a fictional work, a short novel, a melodrama for 10 cents. As time went by the term was used to define a whole array of booklets that contained adventures and melodramas. Randolph Cox (2000) highlights that dime novels comprise different topics, and that it is not true that the only topic they dealt with were the conquest of the West. Detective stories, circuses, the American Civil War, sports and athletics are among the recurrent topics. Cox (2000) describes that in those novels the plot and characters of such novels were stereotypes that usually

lacked depth. There was little room for nuances; there was also little variation in style. Most of those novels were written by “ghost-writers”. As an exception some characters were elaborated when they became the leading character –the hero- of a whole series of stories. In the end, though, heroes had a development which did not go far from the stereotype. Cox (2000) exemplifies how the use of adjectives was completely fixed: “Many names contained the adjectives “Old” and “Young”; Old suggested veneration, respect, even familiarity; Young indicated someone already heroic at the start of his career.” (p. XVI, 2000). Along those main features, dime novels have been classified according to their subject. In a review, Philip Durham (1954) identifies the following topics which are somewhat related to Westerns: West in General; Texas Life; Detectives of the West; Indian Tales; Border Life before the Civil War; Scouts; and Mexico. In each of those dime novels the main issue of their plot could be different, but the treatment is rather similar. Durham poses the main characteristics of dime novels that deal with the West in General:

These deal with romance, hunters, plainsmen, pony express riders, cowboys, Indians, outlaws, horse thieves, cattle thieves, badmen, "desperadoes" gamblers, tough towns, stage holdups, vengeance, violence, and murder. Western life, with all of its facets, is depicted as an exciting adventure, the way it was supposed and expected to be. The romantic plots are stereotyped. Being introduced late in the dime novel period, the cowboys were used only as characters incidental to the story, for the "Cowboy" or "Western" story as we know it today is a twentieth-century genre.(1954, p 288)

Thus, should be underscored the difference between what is called Westerns and dime novels, though they are closely linked.

Even though, McCarthy's novel was written in a context that went far beyond Westerns. It is important to draw a larger picture that could explain why McCarthy's poetics is built in a way that questions official history and destroyed the conventions on which it is built. One of the first books that can give us that picture is *The Zero-degree Writing*. A long essay that Barthes himself defined as an introduction to a History of Literature. Zero-degree writing is a phenomenon that was produced as a result of a set of different historical events: writers were trying to get rid of a language that was charged with a particular meaning – an ideological one. After the rise of Modern literature, zero-degree writing was supposed to be a reaction to allow writing to reach its literary status. Barthes (1957) started his essay by posing the fact that sometimes there were some words or expressions in literary texts that did not refer to any expressive or communicative aim, but that they were trying to impose, according to Barthes, something beyond language. Those elements were the bad words that Hébert used in each number of his *Père Duchêne*. For Barthes (1957), the presence of that kind of element was a marker of a historical process that Literature was going through. Now, the use of some tenses like the preterit is a marker that *means* that somebody is creating, that somebody is narrating. Preterit then, familiarizes what is told; it sets an order. For Barthes (1957), this marker finally revealed that Novels alienated facts, alienated the so-called History. Society created those markers to create believable versions of facts. All this situation related to a sort of mythology that the Bourgeoisie had established in one single product: Novels. Hence, Novels established an order. They

could also impose values and customs as if they were universal becoming then, works that proposed a sort of pedagogy. One important characteristic of this kind of art is the fact that being “fake” indicated that, in his words, the novelist was putting on a mask, signaled as a mask.

Barthes (1957) differentiated between two clear periods: Classical and Modern. In the Classical, language was neat and easily comprehensible. Meanings were communicated straightforwardly, while in modern literature language became the center of the activity. Meanings were hard to convey since the communicative functions of language were, somehow, “blurred”. Taking all this into account, it is clear why Barthes (1957) compared Classical language to math. In Classic times, there was a clear distinction between prose and poetry. The latter was written with a set of ornaments which were not present in the former. Modern poetry erased all those distinctions, introducing what Barthes (1957) called a “discontinuity of the language”. As the functions of language have suffered a process of “darkening”, what becomes clear is language itself: Barthes (1957) described Modern poetry as an objective one. Objects remained as solitary entities that had no bonds with the rest. Such a situation presented objects with full “violence” in a world that lacks in humanity. The feeling that a poetics like that produced was horror, according to Barthes (1957). In Modern writing, the “violence” of this new poetics destroys any ethical stance. Barthes (1957) even defined Modern literature as an act of constraint, at least when poets risked their poetics to the limits of the unintelligible. In the end, this kind of poetics absorbs any style, everything becomes writing.

In spite of what was mentioned, the problem that writers have to face is that language is not entirely theirs. Language is a heritage that bequeaths meanings that societies have built throughout the times. The impossibility of getting rid of them is what makes Modern literature impossible for Barthes (1957) –at least Modern literature could not produce a masterpiece. The consequences of these situations are that literature does not reflect present History –in Barthes’ words, it is “deaf” to it-, and literary myth keeps on being the core of writing. In my opinion, Barthes (1957) implied that Modern writers pursued to surpass this myth by intending to write a text that would not be subsumed by ideologies. It seems as if Barthes were saying that modern writers could not escape History, which makes fools of them. (Writing) is imposed as ritual, not as reconciliation: a ritual is what defines Writing, but that does not solve the multiple contradictions that entail an alienated account of History. Then, for Barthes, each writer would have to renounce to literature, though when they write they give literature an adjournment. Creating a “new” language writers strive to find a zero-degree with which they could produce a writing that would not alienate History –and would not be alienated by History. Barthes (1957) concluded by saying that literature became the quest that looks for a Utopian language.

In his book *The Book to Come*, Maurice Blanchot (1959) finds that Barthes’ book *-The Zero-Degree Writing-* was one of the few that described the literary scene. Blanchot (1959) interprets Barthes’ essay as a diagnosis of what was happening to literature in those days. Blanchot (1959) identifies

three main concepts in the essay: Language, Style, and Writing. The first is the heritage that represents a historic situation that outstrips writers. The second is defined by Blanchot (1959) as the obscure part of the writer, a part that is linked, for Blanchot, to instinct and mystery. The last one is the one where literature starts. Writing is a set of rites, says Blanchot, a ceremony which attempts to express that what is being read is literature –a type of experience different from the ordinary. In Blanchot’s interpretation the scene described by Barthes shows that the literary issue lies in the rebellion that writers are performing against the ceremony (literature). The lack of unity and other type of circumstances that were described as part of the Modern literature is for Blanchot (1959), derived from one ideal: writers striving to write without “Writing”.

In the same book, Blanchot (1959) posits his own poetics –at least I regard it as that-, which is explained by a parallel that the author draws between *The Odyssey* and *Moby Dick*, or to be more precise, between Odysseus and Ahab. For him, the very essence of the Tale lies in one scene of the *Odyssey*: the encounter between Odysseus and the Sirens. Blanchot (1959) interprets this encounter as the very moment when humans face the Unknown, which is what the Tale tries to confront. Through his stratagem, Odysseus glances at the secret of the Unknown, but he does not really “sink” into it, he does not really know what it consists in. On the other hand, Ahab sank with the whale, which, for Blanchot, is something like drowning with a siren. *Moby Dick* ends, then, with a journey that really dares to reach the Unknown. In my opinion, McCarthy’s pose is somehow similar to that of Blanchot, saying

that literature is only that, when it faces matters of life and death; somehow, it is connecting to the quest that Ahab is facing. The function of the Tale for Blanchot (1959) would be then, to explore the Unknown. In my opinion *Blood Meridian* explores the Unknown in that sense.

Aside from those general interpretations of the aim of literature and historical status, it is useful to take into account a model for analyzing and interpreting the specific text. On that basis, I will resort to Hélène Pouliquen's perspective on Bakhtin, and especially how Julia Kristeva interpreted Bakhtin's ideas. Pouliquen (w.d.) synthesizes the main ideas of various literary theories in order to show how socio-critique is a consistent way of interpreting literary texts. First, Pouliquen (w.d.) presents the ideas of young Bakhtin, which are rather similar to the ones posited by Lukács: Bakhtin considered two types of form –architectural and compositional- and the criterion that makes a work good is the articulation and coherence of those types of form. The former –architectural- is an axiological system that produces an evaluation of the world depicted; the latter –compositional- is the way the material is organized. According to Kristeva, Bakhtin is going to be one of the first scholars to posit a dynamic conception of the “literary word”. Kristeva holds that Bakhtin believed that writers re-write History transgressing the official version; creating a richer and multipurpose speech. Considering this, we find a different conception of the relationship between society and literature that can be described by the following characteristics: first, every text relates to others, producing what Bakhtin called *dialogism* and Kristeva *intertextuality*; second, the relationship

between literary text and society is necessarily critical; and third, the relationship is dynamic –more so when we take into account that the reader is the co-author of the piece. Now, a point to highlight is how the relationship between context and text produces multiple meanings, and “carries” an assessment of the world: through language the world is assessed. Consequently, language is giving evidence of the axiological stance of a particular group, society and individual. For Bakhtin, a rich artistic work problematizes the official version –the official values- of a society; by giving a different view of reality art broadens human perspective. Thus, the novel gives way for an alternative speech about some particular events; for instance, *Blood Meridian* is an alternative vision of the myth of the West.

As the novel deals with the so-called myth of the West, it is relevant to give a short account of some ideas that have been posed about myth. Mircea Eliade (1957) identifies some characteristics that are common to a large number of myths. Eliade (1957) characterizes myth by occurring at a time and space which differs from daily space and time. A mythical –or religious- vision of the world “separates” the experience between the Sacred and the Profane. According to Eliade (1957), for a person who believes in myths, the Sacred is what is real, unlike the daily life which is somehow not-transcending. Still, the way life is arranged depends on the myth: for instance, how a house is built should reflect the world’s image (*imago mundi*) that the myth depicts. Eliade (1957) exemplifies how temples and houses are constructed to mirror the order that is found in the myth. The relevance of organizing space in a particular way lies in the sense that in

reflecting what is true in the myth, cosmos is preserved for the community; otherwise, the community would fall into chaos. Now, Eliade (1957) makes a short description of one of the rituals that organizes –and in a way creates– a space: Sacrifice. Different people like Indians or Jewish share this ritual which recreates the creation of the world, and which is in a way a *creation*. Sacrifice supposes a *new beginning*. Above all, ritual preserves the organized world, people in cosmos. When Eliade (1957) concludes the chapter that he devotes to Sacred Space, he reaches the conclusion that the world is grasped as such, as cosmos; then, it is Sacred. To finish with a short revision of some part of *The Sacred and the Profane*, I would like to refer to what Eliade states about the Modern –secular– world. Eliade (1957) holds that the “unbeliever” is a “son” of the religious man. Hence, the unbeliever keeps rituals, and a sort of “degraded” version of different beliefs. Eliade (1957) does not dismiss the idea of existence of the disbeliever in what we see as religious periods. What he finds particular about our time is the “dominance” of a disbeliever’s vision of the world. Yet, Eliade (1957) believes that among the ideas of secular thinkers like Marx, there are some that could be related to those that are typical of religious creeds.

Still we cannot hold that Westerns are myths in the exact same way as those referenced by Eliade. James Cortese (1976) analyzes some Western films to identify them as myths –or anti-myths– of the Bourgeoisie. Cortese (1976) finds in *Shane* the values that American the middle-class believed to be universal. *Shane* is a myth in the sense it shows those values as

indisputable truths. It is also a myth as it is an idealized perception of the past, a heroic past for USA as Camelot was for England. Cortes states that:

What distinguishes bourgeois myth from other forms is that this element of truth is meant to affirm a society's sense of historic inevitability, cultural supremacy and worthiness to rule. The historical basis for such an affirmation may be entirely bogus, but it is enough that the myth operates as if it were true, since, after all, the purpose of myth is not to examine, but to sustain, belief. (1976, p. 124)

Hence, most Westerns depicted conflicts which were solved by the superiority of a way of life, which happens to be the same that was yearned by the American middle-class in the 50s, according to Cortese. Conflicts were reduced to what Cortese qualifies as “conservative” and “childlike” vision in films like *Shane*. In them what is imposed are the “positive qualities”: “dedication to family, cooperative enterprise, the spirit of fair play, trust in the law” (p. 124). Cortese (1976) believes that one of the main characteristics of this particular myth is giving less relevance to Mythic time, and underscoring the present. As a matter of fact, he states that what distinguishes Bourgeois myths is the “silent and continuous intrusion of present” inasmuch as it is a way of isolating the events from the past, and reaffirming the present values. Eventually, for Cortese, this myth of the West is characterized as follows:

Within mythologies there seem always to be cycles of myths in which there is a movement from pole to pole and back again: the expulsion from the garden and the return, repeated in a thousand variations. Speaking strictly of our genre, the West, until about the end of the Second World War, had stood for what it had long symbolized as a more expansive concept in the European imagination: limitless promise, wealth, youth, a chance for a new beginning. (p.131)

Nevertheless, Western films underwent a change during the 50s and 60s, coming closer to a revisionist and critical vision of that past. Films like *The Gunfighter*, *High Noon*, and *Johnny Guitar* included elements that challenged Bourgeois values, becoming, for Cortese (1976), sorts of anti-myths. The hero that preserved the values is absent in *The Gunfighter* and *Johnny Guitar*, while the town which is saved by a marshal in *High Noon* is just a group of cowards –a characteristic that subverts the bravery associated to the people who colonized the West. For Cortese (1976), *Johnny Guitar* fitted Northrop Frye’s concept of ironic myth: “to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence.” (p. 128). A society that was changing in some of their conceptions, and thus, those Westerns revised the heroic past with which some values were exalted. Later films like *The Wild Bunch* are not even going to depict heroes like those who defended values and progress, who were “on the good side”, but they are just going to be admirable for their “vitality and courage”. What they certainly are a group of violent men. Violence as an element in Westerns like *Shane* is essentially amoral. In the revisionist film, violence arises as one element that presents a growing distrust toward the myth of the West.

The issue that McCarthy’s novel deals with not only refers to the ones dealt with so far: History, which in fact underlies this framework. Probably Walter Benjamin’s conception of History best fits the afore-mentioned conceptions. Benjamin (1940) posits a new task for historians, a new way of conceiving History. His concern was centered on “progress” which was

heading to what Benjamin called “barbarism”. The so-called progress was – is- only leaving debris. Benjamin (1940) poses that Historicism had only been depicting the victor’s version of events, and turned those historians into accomplices: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”³. For that reason, what he proposes is a different conception of History to which he assigned the name of “historical materialism”. The essay characterizes the elements that define this new conception; among those elements, Benjamin (1940) holds that “the true picture of the past flits by”⁴, intending to say that the idea of encapsulating the past is absurd, to my mind. The past goes by so quickly that it cannot be captured as historicists think. What Benjamin (1940) poses is that historical materialism intends “to retain that image of past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers”⁵ which for Benjamin, is not the same as saying that historians capture the past as it was. For Benjamin (1940), Historicism makes a mistake in trying to find causal nexus that does not necessary encompass why the past occurred like it did. Now, Benjamin (1940) holds that the concept of historical progress involves the idea that time is homogeneous and empty. This idea is what should be fought. “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]”⁶ An awareness of this –the continuum of history- is what historians should

³ Benjamin, Walter *Theses on the Philosophy of History* p.258

⁴ Ibid. 3 p.257

⁵ Ibid. 3 p.257

⁶ Ibid. 3 p.263

have in mind. Summarizing part of the proposals that Benjamin has posed in his essay, he finishes the essay with two sections that serve as sort of conclusions. The first one says:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a casual connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It becomes historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now" which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (p.265)

Certainly, McCarthy is not trying to make historical materialism. However, I find some elements that could relate the conception of history of both Benjamin and McCarthy; for instance, their skepticism toward the causal nexus of History.

Violence is a wide subject of study. As a complex phenomenon there are different perspectives that analyze and explain the nature and characteristics of it. Culturally, violence has been understood in various ways –not necessarily negative-, so it is relevant to consider that the vision towards this phenomenon varies depending on the historical context, the social status, and the ideology. Regarding all these elements, the World Health Organization defines violence as:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (Rutherford et al, 2007 p.676)

Following that definition, the World Report on Violence and Health classifies violence in three categories, depending on whom the violent act was committed against: self-directed, interpersonal or collective; and four categories that define its nature: physical, sexual, psychological, or involving deprivation or neglect (Rutherford et al, 2007, p.676). Then, each category is defined by the different patterns that each violent act follows.

In spite of this definition, violence is such a complex phenomenon that this sole definition is not enough to reach a true understanding of what violence really is. So, violence can be regarded as a health problem, it can be studied from a sociological, economical or psychological point of view. As the main focus of this work is how violence is depicted in a novel, I solely include definitions and ideas which can enlighten the phenomenon as depicted in a literary work.

Intending to reach a definition of violence that could consistently encompass the phenomenon, Mary R. Jackman (2002) poses why most conceptions of violence are usually incomplete, and then she tries to define the phenomenon considering the missing elements. Jackman (2002) finds that most definitions of violence only take into account what could be called physical violence, disregarding psychological violence, for instance. Moreover, according to Jackman (2002), most of the researchers view violence in the light of two prejudices:

First, violence is typically assumed to be motivated by hostility and the willful intent to cause harm. Second, it is usually assumed that violence is deviant—legally, socially, or morally—from the mainstream of human activity. (p. 388)

Those two ideas are not necessarily explicit in the researches on violence, but they affect the way this phenomenon is studied and understood. Jackman (2002) believes that a concept of violence should include every type of violence; whether it involves injuries and intentional harm on someone else, or whether it is something regarded as socially acceptable and of benefit. In that sense, she differentiates four motivations for violence: first, the desire of benefit to a community –witch-hunting and the Tuskegee Experiment-; second, some violent acts are intended to benefit the victim, including self-inflicted ones –flagellation-; third, the motive for violence could be entertainment or recreation –gladiator fights, bull fights-; and fourth, violence could be an “incidental” result for reaching other goals – injuries that workers suffer due to their labor. Jackman’s proposal is a supplement that could help to understand violence in a broader sense. Eventually, most of the violence depicted in the novel could be conceived according to the most common definition of what violence is –intentionally harmful; however, as the novel is not trying to define a phenomenon as a science, some violent acts that are present are not intended to harm others, or produced by the malice of their perpetrators.

Milton Terris (w.d.), an epidemiologist, believes that a factor that could cause violence is related to the type of society where people live in. He takes into consideration the cases of USA and Colombia. In both countries violence has had a long tradition. Terris (w.d.) identifies how slavery, the genocide of Indian population are antecedents that show how violence has

become a way of solving conflicts, of establishing an order in a society - American.

Finally, it is relevant to introduce some reflections on how suffering and violence has been depicted in some works of art. In her essay on the representation of suffering –in photography principally-, Susan Sontag (2003) poses that war has traditionally been regarded as a normal event, while in modern societies, war has become an aberration. As an example of how war was considered Sontag recalls that in *The Iliad* the description of injured bodies and of those killed is usually a climax in the stories. This way of representing war “requires a keen, unflinching detachment” (p. 74) by the artists that depict such scenes. Sontag (2003) illustrates the artist’s position toward this subject with a passage by Leonardo where he explained how war should be depicted: pitiless, showing all its ghastliness. Still, with this perspective a particular kind of beauty is created: “That a gory battlescape could be beautiful –in the sublime or awesome or tragic register of the beautiful- is a commonplace about images of war made by artists.” (p.75). Nevertheless, the disturbing impact of the novel relates more McCarthy’s novel to Goya’s *Los desastres de la Guerra*, in my opinion. Sontag (2003) is impressed by the cumulative effect of Goya’s etchings, which shock and wound the viewer. “With Goya, a new standard for responsiveness to suffering enters art” (p. 45) she says. “The account of war’s cruelties is fashioned as an assault on the sensitivity of the viewer. The expressive phrases in script below each image comment on the provocation.” One of the characteristics Sontag (2003) highlights in

photography about suffering is the fact today we are –in the modern world– spectators of horror and barbarities. Hence, the depiction of violence has suffered a change in general terms. There has been a process through which the perspective on suffering has shifted, since violence has turned into a meaningless action.

Simone Weil (1939) wrote an essay on *The Iliad* during the Second World War. The essay has a political stance that has nothing to do with McCarthy's novel. Nevertheless, I find that some ideas of her interpretations could be useful for my own interpretation. Weil (1939) posited that the center of *The Iliad* was a phenomenon that she called Force: "it is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns a man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of it." (p.5). I venture to say that Force is a word that tries to encompass that same phenomenon that I call violence. Weil (1939) holds that humans who are "possessed" by Force lose their humanity, they turn into things. Consequently, each warrior that is under the influence of Force in *The Iliad* relinquishes everything to the war. Weil (1939) gave examples from the poem to show how Force is a mechanism that only leaves destruction. Weil (1939) assumes that humans have a soul and, supposes that Force "effaces" it. What deserves emphasis about Weil's essay is that she identified a sort of phenomenon that becomes the center of the story, a phenomenon which becomes superior to such who perform those acts. I believe that in both –*The Iliad* and *Blood Meridian*– characters are subjected to Force. Weil (1939) claims that Achilles and Hector, or any other warrior,

who is subjected by Force loses his perspective insofar as he becomes as if were absent-minded. Weil (1939) held that it is not possible to live as a thing: “the idea of a person’s being a thing is a logical contradiction.” (p. 9); and even when she acknowledged that this occurs with humans, she says that the life of these people:

[A person turned into a thing] is constantly aspiring to be a man or a woman, and never achieving it –here, surely is death, but death strung out over a whole lifetime; here, surely is life, but life that death congeals before abolishing. (p.9)

Weil (1965) believes Force turns itself into only objective. Glory, goods and wealth are only temporary gains, but Force is the only thing that stands at the end. Weil’s interpretation was imbued in the context of World War II; moreover, it is a modern interpretation of a classic text. In that sense, it could be argued that *The Iliad* has no such a concern like the one Weil set out. However, her interpretation is near McCarthy’s context inasmuch as Weil and McCarthy did live in a society where life’s worth has been reduced by the system to become a sort of thing; it is common for some human lives to be valued as if they were just things. For Weil (1939), there is a conception of life that the Greeks gave expression to and that has been lost in our society; Weil (1939) claims to recall *The Iliad* for recovering a humanistic perspective of life, and an awareness of what Force causes. Her hope does not fit in the world that McCarthy describes in *Blood Meridian*, however.

Interpretation

Blood Meridian poses a challenge for both the reader's sensitivity and mentality due to its ambiguous nature. Full of massacres, killings and bloodshed, it contains enough elements to defy a way of conceiving a particular moment of American history. The novel is defiance, one whose center lies in the fact that it presents violence as a common phenomenon that characterizes human history, as well as human nature. And yet McCarthy seems to focus painstakingly on depicting this horror show in a beautiful way. I believe the aesthetic depiction of violence yields the novel to be successful insofar as it transforms our vision of the past, and illuminates poetic images in a landscape unlikely of breeding such beauty. Certainly, violence has been at the core of multiple artistic works inasmuch as it has been present throughout history. Artists have depicted grossness, grotesque and hideous landscapes and scenes throughout the times. Some reviewers compare *Blood Meridian* to *The Iliad*, or Dante's *Inferno*; probably because its violence resembles a nightmarish quality that somehow has been linked to the works mentioned. The list could be more extensive, but I find that those references prove that McCarthy's novel touches a nerve connected to what has been defined, in that vague and gross manner, as dark and gloomy, as the horrid side of existence. It is violence, as depicted in the novel, what arouses such comparisons and reactions. Violence strikes sensibilities which do not get used to their reality, and I am referring to a violence which is not constrained to satisfy an audience as seasoning for an entertaining product. The fact we live in a society that has made of

barbarity one of its main features, it is rather like discovering all of the nasty things that could be hidden in a cellar. I believe that McCarthy is opening one of those cellars to explore, and to depict that barbarity. *Blood Meridian* revises one episode of American history, revealing a ghastly reality which contributed to make USA what it is; though going beyond to configure a desolate landscape that presents a pessimistic vision of what human life is.

This novel constitutes a challenge since it devotes pages and pages to scenes that a large part of our society would believe should be avoided –except if they are depicted in a way that makes them bearable. Furthermore, the lack of morality toward violence increases a feeling of disturbance that permeates it: without a moral code, actions and events seem to be random and meaningless. It is important to note that Westerns is a genre that emphasizes an ideal of morality: the victory of a good and fair warrior over evil. McCarthy is subverting both genre and people’s mentality when he presents a world where there are no morals, where there is no substantial difference among things, an “optical democracy” that the narrator posits as:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships (2001, p.247).

As McCarthy decides to portray a world in a way that does not give particular importance to a plot or a character, it produces the feeling of a narration that flows seamless, without borders and without center. Dana Phillips (1996) holds that precisely that characteristic defines the novel as a peculiar specimen, since novels essentially focus on the relationship of a single character with a world. Phillips' argument is problematic, it could be easily denied by saying that the novel does have a central character, and that the conflict that portrays is not lessened by the fact that numerous pages focus on other different aspects. However, it is true that in the novel there is no such an emphasis on the plot, or on the characters, but on the description itself, the landscape, and above all, the poetic style with which the novel is told.

I find that this particular way of narrating is derived by a particular way of conceiving the novel on one hand, and a conscious distortion and subversion of Westerns as a model of writing, on the other. Regarding the second point it is important to take into account what Jason Mitchell (2000) notes about the way *Blood Meridian* uses conventions of Westerns to depict an absolutely different landscape: for instance, each chapter is introduced by a series of subtitles as in the chapters of dime novels. McCarthy takes up again the conventions with a substantially different purpose: to present a new perspective of what Westerns did describe. According to Randolph Cox dime novels used a stereotype that had even defined that if a character was identified as young, he would be someone heroic that was beginning his career. That is not the case of the kid, or any of the characters in the novels.

Moreover, dime novels described the conquest of the West as an exciting adventure, and *Blood Meridian* is a novel which is not adventurous in those terms; specially taking into account the fact that it does not place a particular interest on the plot. Thus, I believe that not focusing on the characters or disregarding the plot as the main point are part of McCarthy's strategy of distorting Westerns rather than Phillips' idea of branding *Blood Meridian* as a Pleistocene novel, as opposed to the distinction that Lukacs posed.

As part of that strategy of creating a new perspective, McCarthy collects a wide array of historical and fictional sources to configure his book. John Sepich names some of them: historical accounts, journals –such as the *New York Daily Tribune* or the *Daily Alta California*, among other-, letters, dime novels, and Westerns. The book of memoirs *My Confession* written by the former American soldier Samuel Chamberlain is one of the main sources in the novel. Chamberlain gave account of the period when he joined Glanton's gang, after the Mexican-American war. A good deal of the information of the memoirs is the basis for McCarthy's novel, including such central characters like Glanton and Judge Holden. Generally McCarthy sticks to the sources; he does not alter the information substantially. Instead, he introduces a fictional line that allows him to blend fiction and history in a single thread. Sepich holds that, behind this way of working, what underlies is the problem of information: the perspective of those who took action in the events was determined by what they did and did not know, Sepich exemplifies this by recollecting the scene where the kid asked Sproule what

kind of Indians are attacking them. McCarthy sticks to the sources in terms of what they know and what they ignore, not over-explaining each single event as in the typical historical novels. Thus, the readers stand in a perspective similar to that of the characters. Sepich synthesizes the problem as follows:

A modern traveler, lulled by the regularities of jet and interstate travel, would find the computation of distance and time on an abacus of historical record overwhelming. *Blood Meridian* poses to the pilgrim reader a need to recognize underlying layers of information, from the geography of its setting to the biographies of its many historical characters. McCarthy's craft can better be appreciated when his reader can distinguish the nineteenth-century backgrounds within the imaginative synthesis of his novel. A review of source texts displays both McCarthy's devotion to historical authenticity and the audacity with which he tailors sources to his own ends. (2007, p. 3)

Beyond that, I believe there is a construction of History which is quite different from that of the conventional historical novels. The difference lies in a conscious re-construction of those particular events, blended with fiction, in order to compose a recreation that is, at the same time, historic and fictional.

Furthermore, I believe this particular way of narrating the story is related to a conception of History. McCarthy seems to distrust that way of transforming History into a narration where it is identifiable that events occurred in a given way. I surmise that McCarthy would subscribe the idea that it is impossible to give a true account of the past. That single fact leads us to the question of what McCarthy is doing. Collecting a wide array of information of the years when the novel takes place; the author painstakingly follows those traces to create a fictional work. Sepich (2008)

demonstrates how McCarthy took verifiable information to construct the novel: from very minor incidents such as a purchase of guns to a full recreation of the language used in those days in documents, as well as in dime novels. It is certain that this is a common method of creating a fictional work; Harold Bloom remarked that McCarthy, as Shakespeare, used history as a source of stories, since both, in Bloom's opinion, had problems to create a plot. Though, there is also an insistence in History as one of the main issues of the novel, especially if we regard McCarthy's effort to stick to historical sources. The effect the faithful reconstruction of those events produces is strangeness, as Dan Moos (w.d.) remarks. There is a feeling of strangeness since McCarthy's West seems totally alien to the various representations that have been made of what it was. Moos (w.d.) goes further: *Blood Meridian* is a way of showing how Capitalism and its logic were imposed; an imposition that was obviously made by force, or in other words, through violence. In spite of this, the author is not trying to impose his own vision as if it were the true version of what the West was; he is trying, above all, to write a work of art.

Still I hold that McCarthy's distrust of History goes beyond posing an alternative version of the conquest of the West. At the end of the novel Judge Holden affirms:

In any event the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories and none here can finally comprehend the reason for his presence for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists. (2001, p. 329)

To a certain extent, I believe McCarthy shares Holden's opinion. Nevertheless, in the whole idea of making a fictional story to retell some particular facts lies the idea of reaching a better understanding of what happened. McCarthy's novel re-elaborates an image of the past, and in doing so refutes Holden's statement. McCarthy does believe that one's story or the sum of all does not give an account of History; a whole recollection not only of events, ideas and beliefs could set up a more complete frame of historic events, though. The West revisited could produce a better understanding of why America is like it is. In my opinion, revising the so-called myth of the West is related with this purpose.

In an interview for the *New York Times* McCarthy says: "I've always been interested in the Southwest (...). There isn't a place in the world you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West." Without subscribing this notion completely, I believe that the myth of the West is essential for the construction of American identity.

The myth of the West narrates a story: how civilized Americans expanded their territory in spite of the numerous difficulties they had to face –bad weather conditions, isolation-, and the groups of barbarian tribes –Indians- that fought against them. Recently, this version has been softened in the sense they have given Indians a role that is not anymore than that of barbarian tribes, but victims of the expansion, as Jason Mitchell (2000) remarks. Nevertheless, McCarthy is much more critical, and his vision of those events is gloomier. There were no good or bad guys, nor moral principles that regulated the bloodshed and made sense of those events. For

McCarthy, they are just a series of events without any direction, soaked in violence most of the times. Instead, the myth of the West depicted a story where, in the end, a moral principle was established. Consequently, the society that followed those years –American society– had an array of values and principles that effectively regulated the behavior of the people who lived there. Since McCarthy presents a version where there are none of these principles, he is challenging American society by saying that there was no other reason for expanding than the mere profits that expansion implied; or in other words, that Americans were only striving to impose their power. As a matter of fact, Sara Spurgeon (2008) holds that McCarthy is describing how an empire was established; the idea underlying the conquest of this territory was imposing a particular rule.

Here, I want to highlight James Cortese’s posing regarding the myth of the West. For Cortese, the West it is a myth in the sense it was a reaffirmation of the American middle-class values. Westerns were used as tool to proclaim the superiority of a way of understanding the world, of a way of living. *Blood Meridian* presents a world where there is no such superiority; a way of living is not imposed in the same sense as in Westerns. That is why I believe there is an inherent challenge to a vision of the world in McCarthy’s novel.

Besides, the fact that McCarthy uses those symbols and main features of Westerns to subvert them is significant. Jane Tompkins identifies innocence, American pastoral and the cowboy as examples of an appropriate behavior, companionship, and, above all, the defense of values that included hard work and a sort of Puritan ethics –without religion– as the features

that characterize Westerns. All those elements are present in the novel: there are numerous references to the innocence of the kid

The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent. (2001, p.4)

The kid became a killer at a very early age, but he is always an innocent character. The kid is violently innocent. Professor Hungerford links these elements with a wider tradition: innocence was a key element for the English Romantics, for instance. McCarthy recalls them; he also uses this tradition in a distorted way. In the very beginning, on describing the kid, the narrator says:

He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man. (2001, p.3) (Underlined is mine)

The famous quote from Wordsworth's poem ironically remarks how that innocent child could coexist with kid's "taste for mindless violence". Innocence is a characteristic of this violent person, the kid; there is no contradiction in that.

Moreover, Hungerford identifies quotes and allusions seeded throughout the entire book. Some of those referents are from *Moby Dick*, *The Paradise Lost*, and The Bible, among others. So, for instance, in *Moby Dick* Ishmael is prevented to travel in the Pequod by an old mariner who curses the ship, whereas in McCarthy's novel a Mennonite prevents the kid from joining the US military company, since he prophesizes the disastrous end of the company's journey. What it is important is how Hungerford remarks the difference between the former and the latter. While Ishmael is a witty

narrator who speaks from his subjectivity, McCarthy's narrator is one who keeps distance and who refuses to entirely depict the consciousness of his characters. However, I have to point out that this is not entirely true: McCarthy's narrator does give notions of what his characters are thinking; only he does not use the straightforward method of Melville's. Despite my remark, the intertextuality becomes a significant feature by transforming the tradition in order to render a new work. Hungerford underscores what McCarthy said in an interview to the *New York Times* in 1992: "the ugly fact is that books are made out of books." Conscious of that, McCarthy uses the tradition deliberately to challenge it. In the novel, McCarthy playfully takes themes, quotations, and cultural referents in order to create a whole tapestry through which we perceive the world, a mixture of symbols and cultural referents which do not denote what they originally did, but which has transformed in time as well as some that have been deprived of meaning.

In fact, McCarthy's position towards tradition is better understood if we take into consideration the way Barthes interprets the different transformations that literature has undergone in the XX century. Barthes (1957) believes that most novels alienate facts since what they really show is their ideological interpretation—in particular, of the Bourgeoisie. Novels become a sort of pedagogy of a way of understanding reality, they alienate History. Barthes (1957) believes that writers become aware of that, and trying not to subscribe any ideology they strive to find zero-degree writing: in other words, a writing which does not allow any type of alienation. Now,

Modern movements and the reactions against Classical writing are understood by Barthes as part of a historical process where writers were becoming aware of their position within society. Hence, I find that McCarthy is striving to produce literary works which are not subsumed by any ideology. His intention, then, is to use the Language of dime novels and Westerns clearly, but distorting it to present a picture that challenges the belief that Westerners were civilized. McCarthy takes a language and shapes with it, a new figure that rejects the image of the past. It is curious to notice that authors like Steven Shapiro (2009) believe that McCarthy reaches a sort of zero-degree writing. *Blood Meridian's* language is clearly the one that we find in documents of the time the novel takes place, as well as that used in dime novels. McCarthy's craft is a work where the use of language does not serve the purposes of the official American speech about the West –or those of most revisionist speeches, whether bequeathed or not.

Thus, *Blood Meridian* is a novel that subverts a genre: the Western, a conventional way of conceiving the novel, and an image of the past. The central element in doing so, however, is none of those mentioned above, but it is the way violence becomes an insistent feature throughout the entire book. Certainly, in Westerns, Death was a key element as Jane Tompkins (1992) points out. Death was a presence somewhat ethereal, though; a threat that was not fully described in the plot. While in McCarthy's novel Death is a "real" presence, indisputable, a presence created to vex the reader since there is no redemption for any of the characters.

Even though descriptions are embellished by a language where multiple metaphors and allusions are present, this way of depicting a scene does not render the scene in an acceptable image; what is described is harsh, unbearable:

Five wagons smoldered on the desert floor and the riders dismounted and moved among the bodies of the dead Argonauts in silence, those right pilgrims nameless among the stones with their terrible wounds, the viscera spilled from their sides and the naked torsos bristling with arrowshafts. Some by their beards were men but yet wore strange menstrual wounds between their legs... (2001, p. 152-153)

As in the previous excerpt, it is common to find these images without any indication of mourning for those who suffer. Initially, this could link McCarthy to the old representation of war Susan Sontag (2003) notes in her essay on the representation of suffering that such representations should be ruthless and detached –in the old representation of arts where artists such as Leonardo conceived that battles should be represented “ruthlessly and detachedly”. Nevertheless, the repetitive depiction of violent images generates rejection: without making a direct claim against violence, McCarthy shocks the reader, wounds him, and forces him to react. This effect connects McCarthy more to the effect that Sontag (2003) finds in Goya’s etchings *The Disasters of War*. Though, in McCarthy’s work there is no comment except for those metaphors that not necessarily claim against those barbarities –as Sontag (2003) argues Goya by writing a title to his etchings in order to denounce those crimes.

Still, violence is not solely an object of artistic representation. It is also what constitutes the core of a particular moment in American history, and the

core of the lives of those characters that are part of Glanton's gang. McCarthy does not usually focus on what they think about violence –with the notorious exception of Judge Holden. The author gives an account of the events, and through their actions, we can infer their stand towards violence. Most of the characters in the novel see violence as a medium, as the way of obtaining goods and power.

At the very beginning of the novel, the kid gets involved in violent acts, which are part of the typical way of life in the place. Violence is not really an abnormal situation, so it is told, sometimes, just a fact like any other one:

On a certain night a Maltese boatswain shoots him in the back with a small pistol. Swinging to deal with the man he is shot again just below the heart. The man flees and he leans against the bar with blood running out of his shirt. The others look away. After a while he sits in the floor. (2001, p. 4)

However, at the beginning, an epic tone with which some of the actions will be described is also noticeable. Sentences are usually short and there is a constant use of ellipsis.

He lives in a room above a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors. He is not big but he has big wrists, big hands. (...) The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent. They fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes. Men from lands so far and queer that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated. (2001, p.4)
(Underlined is mine)

The use of metaphors that raise uncanny comparisons is notorious: “(the kid) comes down ... like some fairybook beast”, as well as the use of adjectives in a peculiar way as the already-mentioned “innocence”. I would like to highlight that the characters' perceptions of their violent acts is

commented shortly, without giving much room to a further explanation – except in the case of Judge Holden. Curiously enough, in this particular excerpt the kid feels something very similar to what Judge Holden is going to explain later on, which relativizes the interpretations of the struggle between the good –the kid- and the evil –the Judge.

After that, violent actions are narrated explicitly. The narrator changes his own register, being not so elliptic in most of the chapters. An example of how a single fight is later described is the following:

There were boards laid across the mud and he followed the paling band of doorlight down toward the batboard jakes to the bottom of the lot. Another man was coming up from the jakes and they met halfway on the narrow planks. The man before him swayed slightly. (...) You better get out of my way, he said.

The kid wasn't going to do that and he saw no use in discussing it. He kicked the man in the jaw. The man went down and got up again. He said: I'm goin to kill you. (p.9)

The incident is indeed trivial, and the way of giving account of it is direct, without any comment. Violence emerges as another trivial event that solves a simple dispute, lacking any emphatic remark, any rhetoric device to give it other type of dimension. Nevertheless, the narrator uses metaphors in particular moments which produce a sense of mixture, a sort of hybrid that is comprised by a wide range of devices used in popular genre –Westerns and dime novels, and in the tradition of what it is called “high” literature.

Massacres and killings are part of the landscape the narrator describes. They are so common in this particular world that the narrator does not pay any especial attention to them:

They went by the southwest road the way the savages had come. A little sandy stream, cottonwoods, three white goats. They waded a ford where women lay dead at their wash. (2001, p.61) (Underlined is mine)

Violence just becomes natural for those who are involved with it. This common idea acquires considerable relevance, since the impact of violence is to a certain extent, in my opinion, derived from the fact that it is experienced as an extraordinary event. In McCarthy's novel we find this is taken for granted.

Certainly the depiction of violence depends on the scene that it would be portraying. In any case, an in-depth analysis of some of those scenes will show particular features of McCarthy's way of writing, as well as the possible meanings derived from those scenes. To begin with, I would like to focus on a Comanche attack that ends in a massacre of an excursion of American soldiers that were heading for Mexican soil.

First of all, I want to remark how the scene follows a way of unfolding that does not give any emphasis to any of the events. There is a lack of drama in the way a massacre is told, since the narrator, even qualifying people and events through the different similes and metaphors, does not focus his attention on any subject in particular. Instead, there is a flow of images that replaces the precedent. Insisting in something already pointed out: the novel is written in a sort of democracy of things; sometimes the landscape becomes the recurrent focus that draws our attention to it; given that, the narrator describes the events from a position which is near to that of the US military company where the kid is travelling to Mexico. Gradually, the threat that

Indians represent is unveiled, although at the beginning, all they –the company- see is a herd:

The first of the herd began to swing past them in a pall of yellow dust, rangy slatribbed cattle with horns that grew agoggle and no two alike and small thin mules coalblack that shouldered one another and reared their malletshaped heads above the backs of the others and then more cattle and finally the first of the herders riding up the outer side and keeping the stock between themselves and the mounted company. Behind them came a herd of several hundred ponies.

Apparently this particular scene is simply a description of a common countryside event. I like to underscore how McCarthy constantly joins two words in a single one to use it like an adjective: slatribbed and coalblack. Both specify characteristics, but it is also a recurrent device that I believe is linked to a particular use of language that breaks the schematic description from Westerns and the like. The narration goes on:

The sergeant looked for Candelario. He kept backing along the ranks but he could not find him. He nudged his horse through the column and moved up the far side. The lattermost of the drovers were now coming through the dust and the captain was gesturing and shouting. The ponies had begun to veer off from the herd and the drovers were beating their way toward this armed company met with on the plain. Already you could see through the dust on the ponies' hides the painted chevrons and the hands and rising suns and birds and fish of every device like the shade of old work through sizing on a canvas and now too you could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena, flutes made from human bones, and some among the company had begun to saw back on their mounts and some to mill in confusion when up from the offside of those ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpieced suns against the eyes of their enemies.

The sentences begin to acquire length. Little by little, the narration is no longer a matter-of-fact account, but then metaphors which are rather exuberant, and even baroque are introduced –“a thousand unpieced suns

against the eyes of their enemies". The narration progresses in a way that portrays the confusion the attack produces. The attack is reflected in the way of writing. Comanches are described mainly by the objects they carry – taking into account that it is as from the company's perspective, in a long coordinated sentence. Indians are compared to a "fable horde", which gives the whole scene a sort of feverish quality. As the Comanches approach, the narration becomes absorbed by the group of Indians. It depicts them as if they were in a drawing:

A legion of horrible, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still track with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stocking and bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a Spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubing like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in some like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools.

One long sentence gives the account of how the Indians were dressed, what weapons and objects they carried, and what they did while they were getting to where the company was. In the middle of the description there are not even commas, but long coordinated sentences joined by "and". This particular way of presenting the attackers reinforces the sense of delirium that the attack supposes to the company. Even when the description is so

detailed, putting it in this particular way creates a sense of delirium; especially considering how diverse the Indian group was: they carried different types of garments, ornaments, and weapons. There is a quality of carnival in the whole scene: one of the Indians carried a wedding veil with blood stains, a symbol of the Western culture in an alien territory where its meaning is absolutely subverted. Another element that demonstrates the carnivalesque way of depicting the scene is the oxymoron “death hilarious”, which is a comment of the narrator, considering the peculiar “parade” that this group constituted.

The way of depicting the scene is in itself violent, since the quantity of information is enormous. The number of impressions derived from each single element it is condensed in such small descriptions that, in the end, it strikes the reader due to the large amount of information he receives. This way of writing intends to produce the feeling of being hit by a Comanche stampede, I believe. Besides, I surmise that one of the key intentions of the novel is to show how reality exceeds symbols, how the bare facts survive interpretations.

There are some elements that demonstrate how the narrator is also qualifying the scene from the inner point of view of the company: Comanches are compared to a “legion”, which emphasizes a quality of evil people.

I hold that all the subversion presented could be clearly associated with Bakhtin’s interpretation of what a novel is, and what a novel does. The fact

that we can find, in a single passage, a way of evaluating reality from a point of view – that of the company- intertwined with the narrator’s own comments which relativize the conceptions presented in the passage. This particular fact is clearly connected to an idea of the novel that fits Bakhtin’s conceptions.

Oh my god, said the sergeant.

A rattling drove of arrows passed through the company and men tottered and dropped from their mounts. Horses were reaching and plunging and the mongol hordes swung up along their flanks and turned and rode full upon them with lances.

It is quite ironic how the author includes such a commonplace statement as the only one which is said by any character. When the attack began the narration becomes, for a moment, quite conventional. It is important to point out the use of “mongol hordes” to refer to the Comanches: a metaphor that, in my opinion, shows how “crisscrossed” the cultural elements are presented in the book.

The company was now come to a halt and the first shots were fired and the gray riflesmoke rolled through the dust as the lancers breached their ranks. The kid’s horse sank beneath him with along pneumatic sigh. He had already fired his rifle and now he sat on the ground and fumbled with his shotpouch. A man near him sat with an arrow hanging out of his neck. He bent slightly as if in prayer. The kid would have reached for the bloody hoop-iron point but then he saw that the man wore another arrow in his breast to the fletching and he was dead. Everywhere there were horses down and men scrambling and he saw men with their revolvers disassembled trying to fit the spare loaded cylinders they carried and he saw men kneeling who tilted and clasped their shadows on the ground and he saw men lanced and caught up by the hair and scalped standing and he saw the horses of war trample down the fallen and a little whitefaced pony with one clouded eye leaned out of the murk and snapped at him like a dog and was gone. Among the wounded some seemed dumb and without understanding and some were pale through the masks of dust and some had fouled themselves or tottered brokenly onto the spears of the savages.

As long it narrates again single events, the narration follows a conventional way of unfolding. In this particular moment, it is going to stick to the kid's perspective: he believed that a partner was alive and when he tried to save him he –and the reader– discovered that is dead. The description is extremely explicit, and it concentrates on positions and figures, as if it were describing a painting. Again, in a gradual form, images overlap one another, following the kid's perspective for a moment. Moreover, images appear in a sort of random manner, they describe a new action which is only linked by an “and”. I believe there is a clear connection between the action, the perspective, and the way of writing. As confusion is what prevails in the scene, the narrator presents events in a sort of dissonancy: as the bewildering attack of some preternatural Indians.

Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with eyes walled and teeth cropped and naked riders with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws and their shields winking in the dust and up the far side of the ruined ranks in a piping of boneflutes and dropping down of the sides of their mounts with one heel hung in the withers strap and their short bows flexing beneath the outstretched necks of the ponies until they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandy-legged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. And now the horses of the dead came pounding out of the smoke and dust and circled with flapping leather and wild manes and eyes whited with fear like the eyes of the blind and some were feathered with arrows and some lanced through and stumbling and vomiting blood as they wheeled across the killing ground and clattered from sight again.

Dust stanch'd the wet and naked heads of scalped who with the fringe of hair below their wounds and tonsured to the bone now lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming. (p. 51-54)

The description of the massacre then has two particular features: it is depicted explicitly, without eliding any of the gore from the scene; the other feature is how elliptic the narration becomes. This fragment specially starts by comparing the horses' entrance to a "wild *frieze*". I hold there is a conscious use of comparisons with painting; it is like a frieze where one action follows the other in a sort of animated picture. Besides, it is good to note how in pottery and architecture friezes were places where representations of battles and mythical events were portrayed. McCarthy's frieze unravels a perspective which has been hiding, most of the times, of violence: from clubbing and spearing to sodomizing; in this short fragment the turmoil of the attack intends to exhibit a whole scope of actions which were (are) part of violent events. Notwithstanding, in the whole scene we find recurrent metaphors and rhetorical devices that identify the role of the two parties –White and Indians-, and that subvert the hackneyed subjects they have become. On one hand, White are constantly compared to religious figures: after being scalped the victims looked like "tonsured"; one of the dead whites is seen as "if prayer". On the other, Indians are compared to a "legion", and also to a "company of mounted clowns". I believe this way of qualifying Indians is connected to the stereotype that assumed they were evil and alien. Despite using a stereotyped vision, the whole scene subverts those conceptions: symbols and metaphors that were fixed to a meaning just do not work anymore throughout the novel. They are like the wedding veil

“stripped” of its meaning: that is the strong violence that the novel inflicts on us. Going along with Bakhtin’s tenets, I find a polyphonic effect in the scene: the conceptions that we can identify from a typical Western are mingled with others that relativize the conceptions themselves. For instance, even when white scalped men are compared to “tonsured” monks, this particular metaphor is already in a carnival mode of relativizing what is sacred and profane; the scalps are also called “blood wigs”, which could elicit different associations to the wigs that were used in most Western societies between the XVI and XVIII centuries. As a matter of fact, what I perceive here is that behind the ghastly scene depicted there is the laughter which destabilizes the limited and fixed conceptions towards the myth of the West. It is remarkable that Indians during the entire fragment seem to have a sort of supernatural quality: the already-mentioned “fable horde”. The massacre turns into a hallucinatory scene, vertiginous and ruthless. Indeed, full of horror, it leaves room for blending cultural symbols and traditions as Bakhtin conceives the novel, as a carnival.

The second feature I identify it is the elliptic sequence of events. Unlike the description of the whole herd and the group of Indians, here we find three different moments. Though there are long sentences only coordinated by “and”, here there are commas that underscore particular moments. For instance, the irruption is signaled: “then rising up again like funhouse figures, *some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts*, riding down the unhorsed Saxons”. The narrator is pointing out a characteristic which reinforces an idea of horror which is derived from the ornamentation that

Indians used. The raid occurs in three moments: when the Indians charged, the killing itself, and the victims the incursion left behind. As I pointed out, commas are used here to signal particular moments. One of the most important then, is a “catalogue of disaster”: “chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore”. I hold that this particular use of punctuation marks allows McCarthy to highlight particular details, to underscore the disgust derived from the gore of those violent acts. Therefore, there is a subtle procedure that depicts violence linking a perspective –that of the kid and his pairs’- with a distanced commentary about that perspective –that of the narrator. Given that, the procedure allows the reader to comprehend how it would be likely for some people to experience a particular event, and at the same time to be “affected” by what such a ghastly massacre really means. In general terms, McCarthy allows us to understand his characters’ perspective, but he does not allow them to talk in general, since they would rationalize violence –as Holden does. Here we find a phenomenon which has a strong irrational component, explaining it is divesting it of part of its nature.

Now, as violence is another phenomenon among others, in the narration it occupies a space which it is not necessarily prominent. In other words, the narration is a sort of flux where things and people, events and actions are not dramatically depicted. Traces of violence could be part of a landscape that it is alien to us, since there is an effect of strangeness produced throughout the whole novel. I hold that there is a position from which

McCarthy is stating how every single thing is irreducible, and that it shares the same importance as any other thing. For instance, there is a gory scene depicted throughout the march of the kid and a soldier who has been saved from the Comanche's attack:

They followed the trampled ground left by the warparty and in the afternoon they came upon a mule that had failed and been lanced and left dead and then they came upon another. They way narrowed through rocks and by and by they came to a bush that was hung with dead babies.

They stopped side by side, reeling in the heat. These small victims, seven, eight of them, had holes punched in their underjaws, and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky. Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being. The castaways hobbled past, they looked back. Nothing moved. In the afternoon they came upon a village on the plain where the smoke still rose from the ruins and all were gone to death. (2001, p. 57)

A constant pattern is identifiable throughout the entire novel: a journey is described; the landscape which becomes the focus of the book it is the one that travelers find along the road. Traces of violence are recurrent, and they pass by as the journey goes on. The insistence on those images produces a sense of disaster; the territory where the novel takes place is barren and bleak, but plagued by the remnants of unfathomable violence. Now, the narrator uses rhetorical devices that animate the dead babies: "stare eyeless" and "larval to some unreckonable being". Hence, rhetorical devices become a way of communicating what violence leaves, what violence means. With the notorious exception of Judge Holden, there is almost no direct comment about that violence so that it seems mechanical, random.

And yet one can infer an idea of how violence is understood by what the characters say. One of the members of the gang, the ex-priest, tells a story

where the incredible ingenuity of Judge Holden to kill a group of Indians is described. The ex-priest concludes his story:

Gentlemen. That was all he said. He had the pistols stuck into his belt at the back and he drew them one in each hand and he is as eitherhanded as a spider, he can write with both hands at a time and I've seen him to do it, and he commenced to kill Indians. We needed no second invitation. God it was butchery. At the first fire we killed a round dozen and we did not let up. Before the last poor nigger reached the bottom of the slope there was fifty eight of them lay slaughtered among the gravels. (2001, p. 134).

The description of the killing has elements of a sort of picaresque story. Even when the character uses the expression: "God...", and "...the last poor nigger..." there seems to be little trouble in killing Indians, those beings that only deserve ambiguous commiseration.

In that sense, the novel is giving the idea that, beyond the conceptions of violence, this is just the means of getting something. The members of Glanton's Gang have learnt that in order to get what they want; they simply have to impose it by force. When the Gang arrived to a Mexican town, they entered a restaurant. They had been crossing the desert for such a long time that the owner confused them with black people. The owner asked them to sit in a different place. Now, in the gang there is only one who is a really black person, Jackson. One of the white ones, Brown, decided to play with the owner; he defied the owner to shoot Jackson:

Have you got a gun? he said.

A gun?

A gun. Have you got a gun.

Not on me I aint.

Brown pulled a small fiveshot Colt from his belt and pitched it to him. He caught it and stood holding it uncertainly.

You got one now. Now shoot the nigger.

Shoot him, said Brown.

Jackson had risen and he pulled one of the big pistols from his belt. Owens pointed the pistol at him. You put that down, he said.

You better forget about givin orders and shoot the son of a bitch.

(...)

Jackson fired. He simply passed his left hand over the top of the revolver he was holding in a gesture brief as flintspark and tripped the hammer. The big pistol jumped and a double handful of Owens's brains went out the back of his skull and plopped in the floor behind him. He sank without a sound and lay crumpled up with his face in the floor and one eye open and the blood welling up out of the destruction at the back of his head. Jackson sat down. Brown rose and retrieved his pistol and let the hammer back down and put it in his belt. Most terrible nigger I ever seen, he said. Find some plates, Charlie. I doubt the old lady is out there any more (2001, 235-236)

So they finally killed the owner and stayed in his place. Violence has turned into their way of life. The novel also shows that this way of living tends to transform their lives into an unending crossing; a crossing that usually ends with their deaths. There is no peaceful survival for those who have accepted to live that way.

Notwithstanding, violence is an element of a whole frame, it is part of a landscape. McCarthy crafts a novel where actions belong to a flow which allows it to be not only a sort of continuum that does not particularly dramatize any scene, but also where there is a sort of doubling of the scenes that relativizes the meaning of a prior scene. The Comanche attack was part of frieze where a confrontation was depicted, and time later, another frieze appeared, one where Glanton's gang ambushes an Indian group.

By the time the animals were secured and they had thrown themselves on the ground under the creosote bushes with

their weapons readied the riders were beginning to appear far out on the lake bed, a thin frieze of mounted archers that trembled and veered in the rising heat. They crossed before the sun and vanished one by one and reappeared again and they were black in the sun and they rode out of the vanished sea like burnt phantoms with the legs of the animals kicking up the spume that was not real and they were lost in the sun and lost in the lake and they shimmered and slurred together and separated again and they augmented by planes in lurid avatars and began to coalesce and there began to appear above them in the dawn-broached sky a hellish likeness of their ranks riding huge and inverted and the horses' legs incredibly elongate trampling down the high thin cirrus and the howling antiwarriors pendant from their mounts immense and chimeric and the high wild cries carrying that flat and barren pan like the cries of soul broke through some misweave in the weft of thing into the world below. (p. 109) (Underlined is mine)

Again Indians are described as preternatural figures which are menacing the Gang. There is an insistent repetition of some images –the shadowy figures under the sun-, which suggests not only their transience and their deceases, but a quality of the unknown for those who were part of the gang. That metaphor is entangled with others that overlap the initial description of the movement of Indian archers, assigning new meanings to the figures. Narration veers in poetry, a dislocation that is part of the violence the author inflicts on the reader. In fact the features with which Indians are described: “lurid avatars”; “a hellish likeness”; “the horses’ legs incredibly elongate”. Those figures are grotesque; their attributes underscore an alien nature. In the passage there is a conflation of figures which remains at the same level, an evidence of the “democracy” that McCarthy establishes among every single thing, as well as an evidence of a violent way of portraying the scene. Some of the Indian archers are killed by the gang. After the survivors had flown away from the place, the gang’s members approach the corpses.

The dead man lay in a sandy wash. He was naked save for skin boots and a pair of wide Mexican drawers. The boots had pointed toes like buskins and they had parfleche soles and high tops that were rolled down about the knees and tied. The sand in the wash was dark with blood. They stood there in the windless heat at the edge of the dry lake and Glanton pushed him over with his boot. The pained face came up, sand struck to the eyeball, sand stuck to the rancid grease with which he'd smeared his torso. You could see the hole where the ball from Toadvine's rifle had gone in above the lower rib. The man's hair was long and black and dull with dust and a few lice scuttled. There were slashes of white paint on the cheeks and there were chevrons of paint above the nose and figures in the dark red paint under the eyes and on the chin. He was old and he bore a healed lance wound just above the hipbone and an old sabre wound across the left cheek that ran to the corner of his eye. These wounds were decorated their length with tattooed images, perhaps obscure with age, but without referents in the known desert about. (2001, p. 110) (Underlined is mine)

The Indian's carrion is not a shadow under the sun, but a body who is painstakingly described. There is a particular emphasis of the wounds that the Indian bore as an evidence of his bravery, but his figure, now dead, is only a smeared corpse where the meaning of his chevrons is lost. For the gang, it is just a corpse. However, the narrator highlights the loss of a whole culture describing that corpse, there is no reference now but that of the people who overpowered the defeated. Unlike those revisionist Westerns where Indian culture is depicted on the basis of what remains of the conquest of the West, for McCarthy that tradition is absolutely lost. What we can find of Indian traditions nowadays is just a pale shadow of what one day it really was. The gang decides then to prey on the effects the Indian was carrying. They are only interested in what could be useful from the Indian's outfit and weapons. Except the Judge, who instead, looked for those pieces as traces of meaningful objects.

The other effects he spread with the palm of his hand as if there were something to be read there. (p.110)

It is interesting how it has been remarked that the Judge resembles an anthropologist, to a certain extent. He is investigating the effects as if he were a scientist. To better understand Judge Holden's rationalization of violence, we should take into account that his position is a sort of compendium of what western rationalists are. This hint could provide us with a tool to unveil a sort of symbolic meaning of the novel; however, I believe McCarthy intends to give more relevance to a depiction where that symbolism is relative. As a result, allegories are only ways of approaching reality, which, by and large, is not entirely grasped by theories and notions. For McCarthy, I surmise, reality is as indecipherable as the lost traces of the Indian cultures that were destroyed during the conquest of the West.

Now, the doubling of the scene is not only referred to a simple repetition of images, but to an interchange of those metaphors. So after leaving the place where the gang ambushed the Indians, they become the shadows of smeared faces and horses' eyes smeared.

On the day that followed they crossed a lake of gypsum so fine the ponies left no track upon it. The riders wore masks of boneblackened the eyes of their horses. The sun reflected off the pan burned the undersides of their faces and shadow of horse and rider alike were painted upon the fine white powder in purest indigo. Far out on the desert to the north dustspouts rose wobbling and augered the earth and some said they'd heard of pilgrims borne aloft like dervishes in those mindless coils to be dropped broken and bleeding upon the desert again and there perhaps to watch the thing that had destroyed them lurch onward like some drunken djinn and resolve itself once more into the elements from which it sprang. Out of the whirlwind no voice spoke and the pilgrim lying in his broken bones may cry out and in his anguish he may rage, but rage at what? And if the dried and blackened shell of him is found among the sands by travelers to come yet who can discover the engine of his ruin? (p.111)

They seemed to be painted by the action of the sun. Still, I stress that the narrator points out a feature that both Whites and Indians share. The distance between them is reduced dramatically by the repetition of those features. Here the repetition serves as a way of subverting the convention, and also poses a carnivalesque use of traditions and ideologies; all the more by taking into account cultural references totally alien to the environment which is described as that of the “dervishes”. As a matter of fact, the digressive sentence gives account of the stories that were told about the place they were crossing. In a sense it is a miniature that, at once, comments what the conquest of the West was, as well as the gang’s destiny. The questions that end the paragraph remark how pointless this quest was, how much waste that conquest left in the end; questions that mark the highest point of the crescendo of each paragraph. I also note here that the novel is written by making of each paragraph a sort of unit in which an action, idea, or reflection is fully elaborated. In less than three pages McCarthy has changed the focus of his narration, passing from an ambush and a detailed description of a dead Indian to a metaphorical reflection of the destiny of the pilgrims who died in those places. The versatility of topics is derived from that construction that makes the paragraph a single unit. Thus, in the following pages, McCarthy follows the gang arriving to an isolated mission where some travelers have been hiding. The travelers are hallucinated, besieged by Indians, feeding from a dead horse, which is described as follows:

They had but two animals and one of these had been
snakebit in the desert and this thing now stood in the

compound with its head enormously swollen and grotesque like some fabled equine ideation out of an Attic tragedy. (p. 115)

Good part of the imagery of the novel portrays a grotesque world, a world which is driven by madness. Throughout the novel there is a constant sense of hallucination, derived, not necessarily from what is told –which most of the times is fairly realistic-, but from how it is told. The conflation of references and images is the essential element with which this effect is achieved. In his way of writing, McCarthy conveys meanings, resembling the modernists. In spite of this, violence just seems natural, and except for the immediate causes, it has no definite purpose. This is explicable partly due to the hallucinatory mood of the novel, and partly because McCarthy shows violence as a constant that is connected to a senseless reality. Violence is a medium devoid of a rational cause.

However, there is an alternative way of conceiving what violence is. Judge Holden's speeches explain it. Holden seems to be saying, instead, that war – violence- is inherent to life, and, above all, saying war is humans' supreme task. In one of his speeches he states:

Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hands is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is truest form of

divination. It is testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. (2001, p.249)

Violence would be ingrained then, in the very core of life. According to Holden human existence is resolved through war, which supposes the victory of one's vision against that of another. It is decisive to take into account that this long speech is a response of questioning the use of violence in the light of the Bible –when Jesus told that he who lives by the sword shall perish by it. Holden defies that creed and replaces it by another: one which curiously resembles an enlightened individual. Holden is a skilful gunman, who speaks several languages, has certain knowledge of geology, botany, and is also a skilful drawer and fiddler. He even knows tricks of a prestidigitator. And he is also a perverse man who has a particular inclination to pederasty. His sole appearance presents him as a special individual: incredibly tall and absolutely hairless. Finding him as a symbolic figure is alluring, though John Sepich prevents us from doing so, since he finds that most of what has been said about Holden was already part of what is told in Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession*.

Still Holden poses a rationalized version of what is occurring in the novel. To one of the surmises of one of the members of the gang –to a belief that in the past there were two moons instead of one-, Holden answers playfully, using a sort of logic, though:

For each fire is all fires, the first fire and the last ever to be. By and by the judge rose and moved away on some obscure mission and after a while someone asked the expriest if it were true that at one time there had been two moons in the sky and the expriest eyed the false moon above them and

said that it may well have been so. But certainly the wise high God in his dismay at the proliferation of lunacy on this earth must have wetted a thumb and leaned down out of the abyss and pinched it hissing into extinction. And could he find some alter means by which the birds could mend their paths in the darkness he might have done with this one too. (2001, p.244)

Holden remarks at the end of his ironic intervention one fact that has to do with the natural world, as if he were “carnivalizing” the religious speech. On the other hand, his true intention seems to relate to a tenet that Holden has:

The truth about the world, he said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning.

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others. (2001, p. 245)

I believe that his posing is similar to the one presented in the novel. The existence cannot be encompassed by theories or conceptions, since our minds are just other “facts”. This logical assumption could be asserted from the features that characterize McCarthy’s writing. Although the difference lies in the sense that Holden uses those ideas to support the already-mentioned belief that above all there is a logic which defines who deserves to live: war. For Holden, everything is subjected to the “verdict” of the confrontation between two individuals or groups. John Sepich interprets Holden’s role as

the one who unravels the sense of the bloodshed described. In my opinion, what McCarthy is doing is quite more complex: it is entangling his own vision with that of his character, but preserving the distance between his point of view and Holden's. To state that Holden is right, it is equivalent to saying that actually during the conquest of the West, the victors won due to their superiority –which I believe is not shared by Sepich either.

An illustrative example of how McCarthy combines a distant narrator with the eloquent Judge is the story that this character tells half-way through the book. According to Holden, in the Alleghenies, a harnessmaker had a store in this isolated place. He used to disguise himself as an Indian in order to beg for money. One day he was admonished by a traveler who despised him for what he did. The harnessmaker, embarrassed, asked the traveler to come to his house, and be his guest. In the house, the harnessmaker wheedled money from the traveler, though; although the traveler gave him a lecture admonishing him in front of his family. Then, the traveler set out, and the harnessmaker decided to go with him to show him the way, since the place where he lived was located far off from the main road. The harnessmaker showed the way to the traveler and bid him goodbye, but something made him go back again with the traveler. In a darkened area of the road, the harnessmaker killed the traveler. The harnessmaker tore his clothes, and later claimed that they were assaulted. The traveler was buried then by the harnessmaker's wife. Years later, in his deathbed, the harnessmaker confessed to his son what he had done, and asked for forgiveness. The son gave his forgiveness and when his father died, he went

to the traveler's tomb and scattered the traveler's bones. The son became a killer himself. The old wife said at first that those bones were scattered by wild animals; later, she did not really know who was buried there, and even believed that it was her son. This long story described a violence that has no clear causes, but apparently it is the heritage that the new generations should take on. In spite of that, the Judge has an interpretation for the story: war is a burden that persists, and that is why, according to him, violence –war– endures. That is the meaning of life for him, and nobody should interfere as that is the very nature of man:

If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now? Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of man not more predacious yet? The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day. He loves games? Let him play for stakes. This you see here, these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages do you think that will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons. (2001, p.146-147) (Underlined is mine)

The Judge is clearly not only giving an idea of what he thinks violence is, but of what history for humans is. For him, human nature is intrinsically violent; therefore, one should let it be. But, of course, there could be more than one interpretation of that story. The harnessmaker's story somehow represents the whole novel in miniature, a story full of emptiness and darkness about which we could also say that there is nothing but the chaos of some beings striving to live, without knowing exactly what they are doing. Holden's concept of violence, for instance, is a theory that intends to understand that horrid reality. Nevertheless, the series of events that are described are not totally enlightened by those conceptions, but what

enlightens is McCarthy's craft as an artist that makes it possible for all of those conceptions –making sense of violence, and showing violence as a senseless phenomenon- to coexist in a single text.

Holden concludes that violence is a way of ordering existence. It is significant that when he is asked why he sketches some places and animals, he says it is in order to impose his own representation of them.

Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent. (2001, p. 198)

And later he follows his explanations through:

This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation

Toadvine sat with his boots crossed before the fire. No man can acquaint himself with everything on this earth, he said.

The judge tilted his great head. The man who believes that the secret of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.(2001, p. 199)

So that the Judge's violence intends to impose an order that his mind has conceived, an approach that I believe, is directly linked to a rationalized way of understanding the world. Hence, violence becomes a vehicle to establish a rational vision of the world. Nevertheless, for the Judge, violence is the factor that decides who survives and who does not. That is why he says war is god. That is why he remarks:

He nodded toward the specimens he'd collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any

smallest thing beneath you rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth. (2001, p. 198)

The shades that Holden has posited to his own tenets have an underlying law that turns violence into the key element that subsumed everything in existence. Violence is a sort of rule that orders existence.

To a certain extent, this rationalization of what violence is does not apply to the novel itself. Being the predominant element, violence does not seem to have a clear cause, but it is as if it were a fortuitous event and with purposes that are not as transcendental as Judge posits. McCarthy's narrator does not allow us to have a psychological explanation of the actions, which causes it –to some degree– to seem to be full of inhumanity. As a matter of fact, this particular feature is what produces the effect of randomness, precisely opposed to Holden's posing. Although this is an alluring thought, I believe McCarthy is not intending to describe the nature of violence scientifically.

There is a pending connection still: that of art and Holden's sketches. Holden plays a role that could be easily connected to that of the artist. In fact an artwork organizes elements from the world in order to create one of its own. Assuming violence not as physical by psychological element, many works of art could be regarded as violent. *Blood Meridian* would be then an exercise of violence which McCarthy inflicts us, so that Holden would be a mirror where the artist could reflect upon his role and his task. However, that is simplifying a novel to an account of ideas, and that it is disregarding the whole amount of pages and events that does not fit with Holden's ideas.

McCarthy's order is open; it allows that ideas and events coexist. An artwork that challenges a conception of the world is a violent exercise upon that reader, and that pair McCarthy and his character. The difference between both lies in the sense that Holden unilaterally poses his "truth", and acts accordingly to it, while McCarthy constructs a dialogic text where different perspectives come together and co-exists. Hence, the Judge Holden must perform the letting of the blood in order to follow his theory, and that is why he remarks at the end that a ritual that does not fulfill that purpose is only but a mock ritual.

The connections between rituals and violence are rather more elaborated, since McCarthy is not only presenting a univocal stance. In the novel, pair of scenes that are clearly related to rituals, and in that sense to myth, pose a contrast of two different perspectives. There is a contrast between both, which are also doubling the action in a symmetry that enlarges the vision and allows the author to include different discourses and ideas.

The first scene depicts how Yumas attacked a ferry cross where Glanton's gang had settled. Yumas are revenging from being deceived by the gang, who took advantage and began to prey on the port. Yumas surprised the gang and killed the majority of the gang's members, including the leader, John Glanton. His killing is told as a sort of ritual:

When they (Yumas) entered Glanton's Chamber he lurched upright and glared wildly about him. The small clay room he occupied was entirely filled with a brass bed he'd appropriated from some migrating and he sat in it like a debauched feudal baron while his weapons hung in a rich array from the finials. Caballo en Pelo mounted into the actual bed with him and stood there while one of the

attending tribunal handed him at his right side a common axe the hickory helve of which was carved with pagan motifs and tasseled with the feathers of predatory birds. Glanton spat.

Hack away you mean red nigger, he said, and the old man raised the axe and split the head of John Joel Glanton to the thrapple. (McCarthy 2001, p. 274-275)

The author constructs his craft in order to resemble a biblical tone. The style he is using, similes and metaphors, the rhythm and the dissonance are part of the strategy by which the author arranges a piece of work where the tone serves as a marker to denote a meaning –a bleak world where myths wither in the continuum of time. It is true, to a certain extent McCarthy is trying to give his own idea of what the American myth of the West “should” be. Myths were on one hand, the foundations for institutions, and on the other, ways of achieving a cathartic sense of some events. Myth purifies traumas. Myth purifies violence and crimes. *Blood Meridian* is an impure myth as violence prevailed in it because it remains as purely that. In other words, violence and crimes are not purified by fable; they remained simply as horrid and ghastly events that accompanied an absurd crossing.

Still in this particular scene there are identifiable characteristics that have shades of traditional myths as conceived by Mircea Eliade. Before the attack, Yumas have arranged their outfit and dyed it specially to perform the incursion. When Caballo en Pelo kills Glanton, the narration points out the place where he is killed –a bed-, and the way of killing –splitting his head with an axe- as if it were narrating a ceremony. Glanton’s killing is like the sacrifice that, according to Eliade, establishes a new beginning. Although in the narration there is a conflation of elements that depicts the

Western perspective toward the events, when the attack is actually coming is qualified as “an atavistic drama”. In the excerpt, it is also notorious that Glanton is a “debauched feudal baron”, and that the group of Indians that witnesses the assassination is a “tribunal”. The narrator does describe a ritual, but he does it as a Westerner, the Indian names and objects are only incidental. This is not to overlook that the blending of action and cultural referents is what could be clearly related to the polyphonic effect that Bakhtin found in Dostoyevsky’s novels.

At the end of the novel, when the man –the kid- is killed by the Judge, Holden himself affirms that the assassination is part of a ritual. This is the second allusion to ritual:

A ceremony then. One could well argue that there are not categories of no ceremony but only ceremonies of greater or lesser degree and deferring to this argument we will say that this is a ceremony of a certain magnitude perhaps more commonly called a ritual. A ritual includes the letting of blood. Ritual which fail in this requirement are but mock ritual. (McCarthy 2001, p.329)

This particular vision is somehow linked, in my opinion, to the idea that violence is man’s utterly highest goal. One of the curious traits in the last scene that it should be taken into account is that at the end of the novel, Judge Holden is aware of how the novel is going to continue; he foresees the events that follow: the killing of the kid. The depiction of this last scene is far from having a realistic tone; actually, the Judge’s statements give him an aura like that of a supernatural entity. In contrast with Glanton’s death, here the narrator shares a common culture with Holden –the killer. The ceremony would create a new beginning in the world: one where violence

arises as the rule that orders experience. In her essay, Sara Spurgeon holds that within the novel, the traditional myth from Native Americans of sacred hunters is replaced by one where there is no regeneration. For Spurgeon, Holden turns into the spiritual leader of the gang who in the end, imposes a new belief –a new myth; one which coincides with the imperialist aims of the USA. The killing of the kid would be the sacrifice through which a new order is established. Although alluring, I find this interpretation partial and misleading. I share the idea that Spurgeon upholds that the novel presents an indictment to the American national identity based on violence, but I believe McCarthy has no interest in presenting the mythic beliefs of Americans. Moreover, McCarthy wants to subvert the implicit beliefs to create a new approach to a particular event of the past of the USA. In my opinion, what occurs in the novel resembles more what Eliade pointed out as the survival of the mythical beliefs in a secular world. *Blood Meridian's* world is absolutely secular. Certainly in our society there are myths. McCarthy's work seems to challenge more a particular tradition in order to depict what is behind of it –not just to expiate sins, but to shed a different light on an incident, and doing so on what it means to be human.

It is more accurate, then, to perceive the novel as the space where multiple conceptions and traditions come together in a single work. Depending on the particular event, violence could be understood in one of the ways that I have briefly presented, or in others. Similarly to Bakhtin's tenets, *Blood Meridian* is configured by a mixture of discourses overlapped, intertwined. I do not share Sepich's interpretation insofar as it establishes a rigid limit on the

meaning of the work. I hold that Sepich credulously believes in Holden, and dismisses a large amount of what happens in the rest of the novel.

Regarding the fact that McCarthy's work is above all, an artistic piece, I relate some ideas in Simone Weil's interpretation of *The Iliad*, which could enlighten the depiction of violence in *Blood Meridian*. Weil (1939) holds that *The Iliad* describes a phenomenon: "it is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns a man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of it." (p.5) I hold that in McCarthy's novel, force turns into violence –a quite different phenomenon-, though it shares some characteristics with the one described by Weil. For Weil, Force transforms characters into machines that only kill, into objects that have relinquished life:

[A person turned into a thing] is constantly aspiring to be a man or a woman, and never achieving it –here, surely is death, but death strung out over a whole lifetime; here, surely is life, but life that death congeals before abolishing. (1939, p.9)

Violence frequently turns *Blood Meridian's* characters into things, machines that simply kill. Although they could strive to change their lives: as the kid strives during his adulthood, they could not live any other kind of life. They are subjected to violence at any given moment. Weil (1939) poses a humanistic ideal as the counterpart that redeems humanity in *The Iliad* – and in Greek civilization. There is no such thing in McCarthy's world. Weil presents a metaphysical vision of life, while McCarthy's vision is far from being metaphysical. In McCarthy's novel, there is no trace of soul, since this

is a godless world –McCarthy’s. Given that, there is no possible redemption in *Blood Meridian*.

A key element to take into consideration is how *The Iliad* and *Blood Meridian* shed light on reality in a different ways, since the stand of artworks and artists has changed substantially. Unlike *The Iliad*, *Blood Meridian* challenges a tradition –Westerns and a broader literary tradition– and a myth. The Modern world poses issues like a skeptical stand toward knowledge, a fragmentary perception of life, a whole tradition put into question, and History as a source for building an image of the past. These are present in various ways in the novel.

One of the most important is the revision of the myth of the West. The myth of the West is a key element to understand how an image of what America is has been built. On one hand, this myth has served as a way of “purifying” a ghastly experience, since the conquest of the west was indeed bloodshed. On the other, it helped to sell an American ideal: a fair warrior that tames Nature, establishes civilization, and defeats his wretched enemies.

But perhaps, the most challenging feature in *Blood Meridian* is one that puts History into question –American history in particular. Even while painstakingly reconstructing some historical events, McCarthy does not intend to write a historical novel. McCarthy clearly writes a fictional work, which finds not only historical data among its sources, but a wide array of stereotypes that have built an image of the past: the cowboy figure, Westerns, the conquest of the West. He distorts the figures to change our

images of them, and along with that, our mental image of the past. McCarthy coincides with Walter Benjamin's proposal in exploring different materials in order to compose an image of that past: he uses a sort of "constellation" to link different pieces of knowledge in a unique narration that encompasses a truer vision of the past.

Nevertheless, McCarthy is aware of the failure that his task implies –he is a writer who lives in a modern world. Now, McCarthy's intention is not simply to revise a myth or to pose a truer image of a particular moment in the American past, his purpose goes further: he intends to show that underneath the myth of the West there lays an ugly truth: the inherent meanness of the human species. To make an artistic object out of a gloomy and hopeless world could be regarded as a way of using Blanchot's idea of literature: as a way of exploring the unknown. Our societies have veiled their eyes to the barbarity under which they are founded. They have turned violence into a familiar object with a clear purpose. Through films and media, American society has presented violence as an inevitable event for creating a "civilized" society. For McCarthy, violence is also inevitable, but it has not created what we can call "civilized". In that sense, the author presents violence in order to explore what it is and what it leaves. Thus, violence is the unknown, as American society has veiled their eyes to it. McCarthy poses, then, a stance toward an American society.

At this point, it is relevant to take into account Stephen Shaviro's interpretation of the novel:

Writing, like war, is a ceremonial and sacrificial act; and *Blood Meridian* is a novel written in blood, awash in blood. Yet for all its lucidity in the face of horror, this is not a book that sets a high value upon selfconsciousness. And for all its exacerbated sense of fatality, its tenor is profoundly anticlimactic and anticathartic. (2009, p. 19)

McCarthy's fatalistic vision states that humans are inherently violent, that their destiny is to fade into meaningless bloodshed. And yet, he describes it beautifully. In the last chapter the man –the kid years after being part of the gang– wanders around an apocalyptic landscape where American buffalos have been led to extinction. While he travels, McCarthy's narrator describes:

All across those reaches the yammer and yap of the starving wolves relayed and to the north the silent lightning rigged a broken lyre upon the world's dark rim. (2001, p. 318)
(Underlined is mine)

That broken lyre is the instrument that McCarthy plays. His writing is still capable of moving, even when sometimes the long coordinated sentences narrate dissonantly. It would seem that artists in our contemporary world are only capable of performing art under such conditions.

Perhaps what life leaves for characters such as Glanton and his gang is perfectly described by McCarthy:

That night Glanton stared long into the embers of the fire. All about him his men were sleeping but much was changed. So many gone, defected or dead. The Delawares all slain. He watched the fire and if he saw portents there it was much the same to him. He would live to look upon the western sea and he was equal to whatever might follow for he was complete at every hour. Whether his history should run concomitant with men and nations, whether it should cease. He'd long forsworn all weighing of consequence and allowing as he did that men's destinies are given yet he usurped to contain within him all that he would ever be in the world and all that the world would be to him and be his charter written in the urstone itself he claimed agency and said so and he'd drive the remorseless sun on to its final endarkenment as if he'd ordered it all ages since, before

there were paths anywhere, before there were men or suns to go upon them. (2001, p. 242-3)

Blood Meridian leaves an image of desolation of what was a specific moment in the American particularly, and of what human nature is. Furthermore, McCarthy leaves an apocalyptic image of one of the foundations of American identity. Deaths, massacres, bloodshed, lives wasted through senseless violence are the common features of the image McCarthy fabricates of the conquest of the West; an image of the barbarity. One of the affinities I find between McCarthy and Benjamin's theses is that of acknowledging barbarity, a feature that, for both, describes our society. *Blood Meridian* depicts barbarity as an element that fundamentally founded USA, which as an idea shares a certain affinity with that posited by Benjamin in his theses on the philosophy of History.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would remark that *Blood Meridian* is a novel that subverts a traditional way of representing the past – the myth of the West. This subversion encompasses a new vision of that past, but it also deploys a new perspective on History. The method through which McCarthy writes his novel recreates events intending to connect his fictional view to the one that the historical sources gave him. In the end, he is not trying to explain History, but to frame his own vision which is a conflation of the sources and his own perspective. In a sense, this vision contributes to expand our own understanding of the past, though the past is irrecoverable. In order to do so, McCarthy resorts not only to the historical sources, but to traditions such as Westerns, creating then, an image of the past which intertwines all them with his own style, his own vision.

Now, McCarthy crafts an image where violence is the common element throughout his novel. It is soaked in violence. That violence is perceived from various points of view that depict and comprehend this phenomenon in different ways. On one hand, Holden posits violence as the center of existence, as a sort of rule that orders existence, while the narration also presents violence as a senseless and random event that does not respond to any clear causes. Both conceptions coexist in the novel and adequately depict certain situations, but they are not absolutely true. Neither is violence always random –it does have certain purposes-, nor is it the rule that orders existence.

The novel presents, then, a conflation of conceptions, as well as traditions, referents and ideas; a conflation possible through McCarthy's writing. His writing is molded to the situation and through rhetorical devices, he connects his own vision to his characters' perspectives. I believe that

McCarthy's success lies in balancing the narrator's perspective to that of his characters and combining them into a single image.

In the end the image that the novel leaves is desolate and bleak. A pessimistic vision that challenges the typical notions the society we live in tries to overlook: one that presents how barbaric humans are, and how barbaric one of the events considered one of the foundations of USA is. A challenge that seems ambiguous at first, since it portrays such a horrid world, beautifully, but in doing so, it presents another aspect that it is also part of human nature. Probably this is related to a full vision of the world where hierarchies are replaced by a sort of "democracy". The novel does not focus so much on a plot or character, but on a flow where events and things are equal. I believe that it is also a challenging vision of what life is.

Blood Meridian is a like a seamless flow where the life of a character –the kid - is told, and where there are neither peaks nor pits. What exists is a continuum where stances, ideologies and images overlap. In a way, it is also a violent way of subverting an idea of classic art, and in that sense, the novel aligns with the changes introduced by Modern and even Postmodern writers. In the end, we can conclude that the way of representing violence corresponds to a specific situation in the history of arts, though it is not to say that every single resource and trait of an artwork is determined by it. The representation of violence in Blood Meridian sheds lights on it because it dares to explore its nature, and it dares to destabilize our preconceptions of it, as well as our preconceptions of the past.

As the scope of themes and topics dealt with in the novel is so broad, they go beyond the scope of the present study and I chose to point out some. First, to relate Blood Meridian with that idea of the Great American Novel, given that some critics consider this novel as one that fits to that conception. It

would be fruitful to compare McCarthy's novel to *Moby Dick* or *Absalom, Absalom!* It would make a sense of how the idea of encompassing all of what the USA means in a single text has changed throughout the years. There could be an in-depth analysis of how nature is presented in McCarthy's novel, though I believe there are some essays on that particular topic. Finally, I would think that the concept of History could be analyzed and interpreted in-depth, too. That is to say, McCarthy could be composing a book which is an x-ray of the implicit conception of history in American society. Symbols and cultural referents would be the tools for doing that. Furthermore, the connections between the "messianic" features that are present in Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* – recalling that those features were derived from the strong influence that Gershom Scholem had on Benjamin – could be explored, and a reading of the novel that would assume Holden as a carnivalized Messiah. The connections could give a clear idea of what McCarthy's pessimism really means. In sum, this study gives some insights about this work, but the novel offers a wider specter yet to be explored.

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Appendix

My Heart Leaps up when I Behold

By William Wordsworth

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a man;

So be it when I shall grow old,

Or let me die!

The Child is father of the Man;

And I could wish my days to be

Bound each to each by natural piety

