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Stacey Peebles' new book, Cormac McCarthy and Performance, is the first comprehensive overview of the famous author's writings for film, theatre and film adaptations of his novels. Uncovering these neglected works by drawing key sources from McCarthy's newly opened archives and interviews with several collaborators, the book examines titles such as the 1977 television-broadcast film *The Gardener's Son*, McCarthy's unpublished screenplay from the 1980s that became the foundation for the novels *Border Trilogy* and *No Country for Old Men*; various productions of his two plays; and seven film adaptations. Further info Vice president of the Cormac McCarthy Society, an associate professor of English and director of film studies at Centre College, Peebles focuses on the theme of tragedy that arises in McCarthy's work, conveying the difficulty of translating his vivid depictions of violence and suffering into the film medium by giving us a brief look into the mer saga of American Cinema —and cinema generally—no stranger to violence. In 1903, one of the first reelers, the Edwin S. Porter *Great Train Robbery*, showed off a group of criminals who did not hesitate to shoot an innocent bystander or hit a man in the face with a rock before throwing a body from a moving train. Later years will pass the milestone after the violent milestone: Bonnie and Clyde meet their harrowing and overly brutal ending in Arthur Penn's 1967 film (a level of graphic realism that audiences have seen every night on the evening news about the Vietnam War, Penn implied); Michael Corleone ordered hits on all his rivals to take place in conjunction with his nephew's baptism in Coppola *The Godfather* (1977); Quentin Tarantino blew his way into the national consciousness with a troubling mix of violence and comedy in *Pulp Fiction* (1994); and the development of slasher films of the 1970s into torture porn saw post-9/11 (2004) and *Hostel* (2005). Even now, when a superhero movie presents violence as fantastic or metaphorical, audiences seem ever willing to consider, even testing themselves against, spectacular violence in theaters. From *The Great Train Robbery* *The Western*, the genre that inaugurated *The Great Train Robbery* into film, may not be as thly as it was in the 1950s and 1960s, but it remains alive, resurrected from its claims of hubris by films such as *True Grit* (2012), *The Revenant* (2016), and *Hell or High Water* (2017). Violence is arguably a fundamental element of the genre, and some films bring that blood to extremes, such as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) or *The Hateful Eight* (2015). And so western novels acclaimed from Pulitzer Prize-winning writers like Cormac the *No Country for Old Men* is great (and very very adapted for the screen by the Coen brothers, it would seem like a sure bet, full of cinematic potential. (And who remembers that failure was *All the Pretty Horses*, anyway? McCarthy's 1985 novel *Blood Meridian* is epic in scope, style, and import. It has a narrative focus and a sweep that is, as Steven Frye and others have argued, likely influenced by Western films from directors like Peckinpah. The language of the novel cannot be literary and, at the same time, richly imagistic. After all, this is not Reminiscent of Things of the Past, an exploration of deep internal memory and a stream of consciousness. *Blood Meridian* is a story in which action and landscape speak loudest, and while it may be philosophical, political, historical, and theological, it may be especially a clear, disturbing, haunting spectacle. And spectacle is the very language of the film. Despite those attractions and advantages, however, the novel has so far avoided attempts to bring it to the screen—perhaps suggesting that, at least as far as violence is concerned, there are still some places located on the cinematic map. *Blood Meridian* is a historical novel based on a variety of sources, most notably Samuel Chamberlain's army memoir *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* (Ed. William Goetzmann, Texas State Historical Association, 1996). In the late 1840s, Chamberlain fought in the Mexican-American War and after that rode with John Glanton and his gang, who were contracted by the Mexican government to kill and kill Native Americans. Some of Chamberlain's experiences are the basis for the life of the boy, the book's nameless protagonist who from an early age harbors a taste for mindless violence (Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, 2008). *Blood Meridian* followed the boy when he left home at the age of fourteen, traveled to Texas, miraculously survived a disastrous filibustering expedition to Mexico, and then joined the Glanton gang. McCarthy's research, however, goes far beyond Chamberlain. He noted precise details about the geography and architecture of places like San Diego, Tucson, and Fort Griffin; he found it took seventy-five parts saltpeter, fifteen parts charcoal, and ten parts sulphur to make gunpowder that could be passed through; and he examined the currencies, populations, individuals of people, and vocabulary. He made a list of horse diseases that included strangling, sollander, stanquary, sealing, scouring, scurp, and sandcreaks. These vast historical and physical details lend the novel a feeling of authenticity, of course, but it also presents what John Sepich calls the *Blood Meridian* information problem: that historically verifiable novel characters and events cannot be identified or immediately to most readers. In addition, McCarthy's devotion to historical authenticity is set against a backdrop of courage with which he adapts the source to his own ends creating interesting friction. The boy is the protagonist of the novel—and the boy is not Chamberlain—but Glanton's gang history records provide the backbone of the book. Without them, Sepich says, *Blood Meridian* looks like three hundred pages of bizarre evidence, derived from McCarthy's imagination, to support Judge Holden's [character's] claim that war and violence dominate men's lives. Understanding the novel, Sepich implies, requires historical recognition in particular to justify such representations of extreme violence (*Notes on Blood Meridian*, 2008). However, the earliest attempts to adapt the novel for the film, take a different approach, roll back the frequency and extremity of violence and animate it instead with theological significance. After McCarthy became famous in 1992 with *All the Pretty Horses*, producer Scott Rudin bought the rights to *Blood Meridian*, and in 1994 Steve Tesich was working on a screenplay; finished version dated January 1995 (Busch, *Daily Variety*, 1994; Tesich, *Southwest Writers Collection*, Wittliff Collection, Texas State University). Tesich previously won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for *Breaking Away* (1979), and he adapted John Irving's novel *The World According to Garp* (1982). *Blood Meridian* was one of his last projects before he died in 1996. John Grady Cole (Matt Damon) bustin' brons in Billy Bob Thornton's film adaptation of *All the Pretty Horses* (Columbia Pictures, 2000). The opening of the scenario uses the Leonid meteor shower on November 13, 1833 to frame his approach to the story. While the novel opens with the boy's father talking briefly about the night the stars fall with such frequency to surprise those watching, Tesich begins in a literally cosmic way. The camera begins in space, hovering far above the earth, as pieces of rock move past. This is the meteor shower that marked the birth of the child. Meteors increase in number to hundreds, then thousands, then the camera injures towards the earth, one of the meteors raining fire on the terrified people below. The scenario then repeatedly uses overhead shots to emphasize the breadth of the landscape. They suggest, too, that human actions are insignificant at the same time that they have, paradoxically, cosmic imports. What the import might be, especially with regard to the boy, is the central question of the scenario. At different times in the story he is compared to Judas, then to Christ. Judges, it turns out, are unambiguous demons. The scenario ends cosmically too, with the judge moment a child jumps after a small child the judge has disposed of *They fell through the berka*, empty, the boy cried and called. LORD! OH, MY GOD, WHERE ARE YOU? They keep falling, and the scenario ends. The child's last line is clumsy and theological allegory belabors—Why did you leave me, Lord?—but it serves to culminate this interpretation that unreservedly takes a creative leap with the material to emphasize the child's metaphysical and theological choices, evil nature, and struggle to understand God's money-existed intentions. The theological approach also frames the violence of the story as a satanic temptation to man rather than as a historical reality, a dark view of human nature, or an interesting visual spectacle. The result is an effective way to address cinematic issues especially about what to do with all the obvious brutality and bloodshed. Shot from the scene of Westray's death (played by Brad Pitt) in Ridley Scott's adaptation of *The Counselor*. Westray was executed with a device called a bolito that gradually strangled and beheaded the victim. Tesich's interpretation, however, is only the first of many that will never reach the screen. Years later, Ridley Scott decided to take on the project, and he even set a 2009 release date (Thielman, 2007). Scott immediately abandoned that effort, however, saying that in his case he could not figure out a way to deal with the widespread violence. In his commentary on Blu-Ray for *The Counselor* (2013), he reflected back on that decision: *Blood Meridian* was one of my favorite readings. ... You think, wow, this is going to make a Western slam-dunk, to be fantastic. But it was so bloody and so unforgiving, unexpectedly dark, that we had written it, it was written by Bill Monahan, a good screenplay. But the orchestration of death is so endless, over and over, that I have to say, I wonder - should this not remain a book rather than trying to make it into a movie? Scott worked with the screenplay by Bill Monahan, who won the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for *The Departed* (2006). Unlike tesich version, many people have heard of *Meridian Blood Monahan*, and it is available for download on several online screenwriting forums. Unfortunately, this is an unauth authenticated copy—it doesn't include Monahan's name on the title page and is associated with it only by the hearsay. Like Tesich, this version makes changes to the novel plot, although here the effect is more Peckinpah on steroids than Bergman-lite. It begins with the boy shooting his father drunk, dying and ending, after a series of relentless battles, scalplings, murders, and orations from the judge, with the final confrontation between the two characters. This time, however, the boy pulled bowie's knife, and a kind of fight that sounds but is not visible, it appears wounded but alive. In the final scene, the boy is in charge of a small, small child, From Elrod, who he killed in a shootout. He promised to take the boy to the East and raise him, and the two went together, leaving the West and his endemic violence behind. After Scott succumbed to the adaptation, director Todd Field took the reins, working on his own screenplay (Medina). [McCarthy's] work examined our core, field said at the time, two faces of violence side by side in every act of savageness - the brutal power of purpose holding hands with desperate, curled weaknesses. Like Scott's initially, Field's *Blood Meridian* is also set for release in 2009. That version also didn't pass, and the next person who openly took on the challenge was James Franco. But somewhere along the way, Andrew Dominik, Tommy Lee Jones, and John Hillcoat are all considering projects as well. In 2009 it was reported that Jones had written novel adaptations at some point in the past and that Hillcoat had thought of trying to direct the adaptation before working on Australian Western *The Proposition* (Fleming, *Daily Variety*, 2009; Bledsoe, what's going on? In an article for the *Vice.com* website about various efforts at *Blood Meridian*, James Franco wrote that Andrew Dominik had talked to him about being part of the Plain City adaptation and that during that conversation Dominik mentioned that he had also thought of pursuing the *Blood Meridian*. The conversation with Dominik spurred Franco himself to try the *Blood Meridian*. He shoots a half-hour test reel that shows how the gang met the judges (Franco, James Franco's 'Blood'). Scott Glenn plays Tobin and Mark Pellegrino, who Franco notes is his old acting teacher, plays the judge (Franco, Adapting). Mark Pellegrino as the judge in James Franco's half-hour test reel for the *Blood Meridian* Test was outstanding, reports Franco, and in 2011 he got the green light for a full adaptation of Scott Rudin, who still owns the rights (Franco, Adapt; Brooks, Franco to Direct). But this will turn out to be another false start. In 2014 Franco told me about his own failed attempt at *Blood Meridian*, removing Rudin's name from the narrative: It was a dream come true, he wrote, but, for various reasons, it fell apart. The unnamed producer got mad at me and took his rights back, so, bam, that's it. I can't do it (Franco, Adapt). Then in May 2016, word circulated that Franco would indeed direct *Blood Meridian*, this time with Russell Crowe in the lead role (presumably as a judge) and also featuring Vincent D'Onofrio and Tye Sheridan. However, almost immediately, news followed that the adaptation had been removed because Franco did not, in fact, have the right to adapt and some speculate that the publicity has suddenly slipped already strong negotiations (Jaafar). This second false for Franco, then, it also seems to have ignited Rudin's lack of trust in the project. Given the parade of failed attempts by quite different writers and directors, *Blood Meridian* has developed a reputation as an impossible adaptation, a story with so much blood and pain that trying to put it on screen will produce the inevitable capitulation. McCarthy himself, however, disagrees, at least when it comes to *Blood Meridian*. When John Jurgensen asked if it was impossible to adapt for the film, he said, it was all nonsense. The fact that it is a grim and bloody story has nothing to do with whether you can put it on screen or not. That's not the problem. The problem is it will be very difficult to do and will require someone with abundant imagination and lots of balls. But the pay can be overwhelming. As McCarthy suggested to Oprah Winfrey when talking about the plot of *The Road* (CBS, 2007), assuming you know how the story will end up is a mistake—it's better to take risks and see where the road takes you. The world is adequacy with violence and suffering, and no McCarthy narrative suggests that as much as *Blood Meridian*. But the darkness did not go unending, nor did it hinder resistance and hope. Many of McCarthy's characters—John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses*, Black in *The Sunset Limited*, and even the child in *Blood Meridian*—recognize the cruelty and suffering inherent in the world around them but they push back, they continue to ride. Hollywood isn't quite the Wild West, of course, but there may still be hope for a successful adaptation of *Blood Meridian*. And who doesn't like good stories about horses with long odds? [1] Notes on Hobbs, Hamilton, and Thompson appear on the pages of photocopied notebooks in folders labeled OV (West). Cormac McCarthy Papers box 35, folder 5, n.p. Notes on cities, gunpowder prescriptions, and lists of horse diseases appear in the manuscript notes folder with holographic corrections, Cormac McCarthy Papers box 35, folder 7, n.p. Southwest Writers Collection, Wittliff Collection, Texas State University, San Marcos. www.utexaspress.com www.utexaspress.com

