

Anti-Theodic Allegory of Manifest Destiny in the Film *Noah*
and the Novel *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*

Introduction

Creation is laid waste. Apocalypse is meted out to plunderous men. With *Noah* auteur director Darren Aronofsky fearlessly delivers a syncretic¹ celluloid spectacle that, while neither achieving nor surpassing the brilliance of his prior oeuvre², nevertheless succeeds in nudging the Biblical filmmaking genre towards the secular and science fiction, and therefore, a more universal arena. Leaving aside the timely and relevant environmentalist aspects of the film, I argue that *Noah* is an anti-theodic allegory of European-American manifest destiny in the same vein as Cormac McCarthy's 1985 novel *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (hereafter referred to as *Blood Meridian*)³, of whose lapidary, epigraphic prose rises to a biblically epic register.

Defining Anti-Theodicy and Manifest Destiny

¹ I specifically employ "syncretic" here, because in the film's cosmogonic retellings, there are aspects of external and complimentary religious traditions, e.g., Kabbalah (most obviously represented by the "zohar" element which the descendants of Cain mine, and which provides the fuel for their industry and expansion; Kabbalah is also at the heart of Aronofsky's 1998 film *Pi*) and Gnosticism (i.e., the Creator of *Noah* appears to be a god of evil and destruction; cf. Isaiah 45:7, "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things" [*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*]). If there was sufficient time to conduct more research, I would be able to expound more on the syncretic aspects of the film. I admit that I do not possess enough knowledge regarding Kabbalah and Gnostic religious traditions to be able to explicate further.

² In my opinion, *Pi* (1998), *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), and *Black Swan* (2010) represent his finest work to date. I hesitate to include *The Fountain* (2006), because it is often byzantine bordering on incoherence, although I did enjoy it.

³ I am peripherally aware of some scholars' Gnostic reading of *Blood Meridian*. Again, I do not possess sufficient knowledge to compare and contrast the Gnostic elements of the film and the novel, although I do think it is worth pointing out.

It is first necessary to unpack the concept of anti-theodicy. Theodicy is “the vindication of the divine attributes, especially justice and holiness, in respect to the existence of evil.”⁴ Theodicy presupposes that evil and human suffering are an outcome of divine punishment, ambivalence, and nefarious spirits, as discussed in our previous class sessions. Anti-theodicy, on the other hand, is the total rejection of these causative aspects of evil and human suffering. For the purposes of this analysis, I posit that the anti-theodic worldview of *Noah* and *Blood Meridian* cast the divine as embodying atavistic evil, incarnate in Noah and the Judge⁵ of *Blood Meridian*, and not as an inherently just and good divine figure.

It is equally necessary to unpack the concept of manifest destiny, which is defined as “the doctrine or belief that the expansion of the United States throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable.”⁶ In this definition, “justified” is the operative word. The westward expansion of the United States, including its imperialist expansion outside of the North American continent, was not without consequences; it is those consequences—the plunder of native populations, of black bodies⁷, and of natural resources—that manifest destiny seeks to

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*

⁵ McCarthy refers to the Judge, a semi-historical figure, as either “Judge Holden” or simply “the judge” without capitalization. McCarthy writes of the Judge, “Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of lions and ledger books must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing” (XXII).

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*

⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates tackles this subject thoroughly in his writings, most notably in his memoir *Between the World and Me* (2015) and his 2014 article for *The Atlantic* “The Case for Reparations” (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>).

justify. Both Noah, especially as presented in the film alongside a completely whitewashed cast⁸, and the Judge, “some great pale deity,”⁹ are avatars of this god of evil, of European-American manifest destiny where “the sun to the west lay in a holocaust.”¹⁰

The Pale Deity of Anareta

In the first act of *Blood Meridian*, before the Kid¹¹ and Toadvine join the Glanton gang, whose exploits comprise the bulk of the action in the novel, McCarthy describes the members of a United States filibustering cavalcade in which the Kid finds himself: “The survivors...slept with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night.”¹² Anareta comes from the Greek astrological term *ἀναρέτης*, the destroyer or murderer planet.¹³ Aronofsky presents the apocalyptic earth of *Noah* as similarly anaretic in nature: wickedness, waste, and violence have consumed the planet. Iceland, presumably because of its ancient deforestation, is used as a

⁸ The principal actors, the actors who voice the Watchers, and the extras, are all white. Did Aronofsky pull a Ridley Scott? In a 2014 interview with *Variety* regarding his film *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, Scott said, “I can’t mount a film of this budget, where I have to rely on tax rebates in Spain, and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such. I’m just not going to get it financed. So the question doesn’t even come up.”

⁹ *Blood Meridian*, VII; he is also described as “immense and pale in the revelations of lightning...declaiming in the old epic mode” (IX).

¹⁰ *Blood Meridian*, VIII.

¹¹ McCarthy refers to the Kid as only “the kid” or “the man” (in the final act of the novel). He is never given a proper name.

¹² *Blood Meridian*, IV.

¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary*

backdrop¹⁴. The Creator, through the Watchers, bequeaths violence, warfare, and plunder, especially of the light and fire producing zohar, to men. Soon after the Glanton gang first meets the Judge in the middle of the desert (“There [the Judge] sat. No horse. Like he’ been expectin us...You couldn’t tell where he’d come from.”), he teaches them how to manufacture a substitute for gunpowder from brimstone, sulfur, and urine with which to lure and massacre a group of natives.¹⁵

To the Creator god of *Noah*, and by extension to Noah himself, the descendants of Cain, and humankind entire, are autonomous savages that must be destroyed. Aronofsky most vividly depicts their condition in Noah’s hallucinatory apocalyptic dream sequence in which Tubal-Cain and his people prepare for battle against the Creator at the edge of the ark construction site.¹⁶ The Creator’s destruction of humankind, because of their “wickedness,” is in direct contradiction to the ethnogeny of humankind preceding the deluge in which god says, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of

¹⁴ Having hiked along the Laugavegur Trail of southern Iceland, I can personally vouch for its treeless landscape. For reference, I refer you to a 2009 report from the Icelandic Forest Service: http://www.skog.is/forest/images/stories/forestinfo/forestry_treeless_land_2009.pdf.

¹⁵ *Blood Meridian*, X.

¹⁶ Cf. *Blood Meridian*, IV. As a group of natives attack the filibusters, McCarthy describes the scene in similarly startling and terrifying apocalyptic imagery: “...you could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of...flutes made from human bones...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....A legion of horrors, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fever dream with the skins of animals and silk finery...one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil...and some in headgear of...rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo...one in the armor of a Spanish conquistador...the horsemen’s faces gaudy and grotesque...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...”

the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”¹⁷ Aronofsky deliberately places the aforementioned passage *after* the deluge and into the mouth of Noah: “Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth,” he says in the film. Noah and the Creator have attained manifest destiny. The total annihilation of the savages and the conquering of the earth are complete.

To the Judge of *Blood Meridian*, as a malevolent demigod of Anareta, the very fact that there exists life, which is not under his control, is unacceptable. McCarthy illustrates the Judge’s sentiment in a particularly chilling passage of the novel: “Whatever exists, [the Judge] said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent...The judge placed his hands on the ground. He looked at his inquisitor. This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation.”¹⁸

In the final act of the novel, the Kid who is now a man, encounters the Judge, who “seemed little changed or none in all these years,” at a saloon and then again when the kid stumbles upon him in an outhouse. McCarthy is vague here, but we can infer that the Judge has killed, and possibly raped, the Kid: “The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered [the Kid] in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him.” Later, a man warns his friend not to enter the outhouse, but he enters anyway. “Good God almighty, he said. / What is it? / He didn’t answer.” In the last paragraph of *Blood Meridian* McCarthy snaps the narrative into the present tense to

¹⁷ Genesis 1:28, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*

¹⁸ *Blood Meridian*, XIII. I should note that for the uninitiated McCarthy uses punctuation and capitalization sparingly and never quotation marks.

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deliver an essential description of a god of evil and of the perpetuation of manifest destiny: “[The Judge] never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die.”¹⁹ War, violence, and rapine are eternal. And so it is with Noah who acknowledges that atavistic wickedness lies within him, to be passed on to future generations.

¹⁹ *Blood Meridian*, XXIII.