

The Barcode Monster:

Supermarkets, Supermarket Data, and Surveillance in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the dream that begins Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, an opening sequence which previous readings have tended to overlook. I argue that the monster in this dream is an odd assemblage: a cave-dwelling predator somehow compiled from elements redolent of the blasted commercial landscape which the father and son will later scour for food. In particular, I contend that the tolling brain and unseeing mode of observation that mark this creature resonate unexpectedly with the barcodes that first entered American life in the 1970s and which became increasingly difficult to avoid during the 1990s. Detailing the increasingly sophisticated use that major supermarkets made of this technology following the initial rise of personal computers, I argue that their barcode systems were a crucial forerunner of the digital surveillance forms that prevail today—and I also argue that an antipathy toward these systems becomes apparent as *The Road*'s father, while always feeling followed, discards all branding and packaging in order to revalorise food on the basis of its material worth. At the end of the essay I relate McCarthy's ambivalent response to the encroaching commercial logic of the American road to other dystopic fantasies, including Ever Dundas's *Hell Sans*, in which external repositories of personal information seem similarly to limit bodily freedom and desire.

Keywords

Apocalypse; Barcode; Commodity; Supermarket; Surveillance.

A novel about apocalypse and a desperate journey on a ruined highway system, the cultural significance of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* was obvious to critics immediately upon its publication in 2006. Understanding the novel as a pinnacle in McCarthy's career, many searched it for echoes of his existing work, from the Southern Gothic vision of *Suttree* (1979) to the violent odyssey of *Blood Meridian* (1985), even as they recognised that it was written in a mode of prophetic warning quite unlike anything he had tried before. This emphasis on the importance of the novel also led critics to pour their energies into ascertaining the true cause of the disaster that triggers its main narrative. As Adeline Johns-Putra suggested, while some "have convincingly countered that it really does not matter" why this catastrophe occurs, and even that "it is this not mattering that is the novel's point," many if not most have continued to look for a key to unlock its final meaning (Johns-Putra 520). Certain aspects of *The Road*—and not least the fact that it calls the early explosions "concussions," a word choice straight from the pages of John Hersey's "Hiroshima" (1946)—have persuaded some that McCarthy shares Hersey's concern with a nuclear fallout (McCarthy 54). Others, noting that McCarthy's father's memories often suggest nature was in decline long before these detonations, have seen the novel as an ecological jeremiad.¹ During these and other acts of critical decipherment, however, the dream sequence that opens *The Road* has received surprisingly little attention. Perhaps because it disrupts the focus on human agency that is central to these dominant readings, or perhaps because it brings together such a discordant range of allusions, the father's opening vision of a cave creature with "alabaster bones," a "head" that "swung... from side to side," and a "brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell," somehow remains buried beneath the many pages that follow it (McCarthy 1). Critical discussions so far have not reflected the prominence that McCarthy gave to this dream sequence by placing it at the very start of his novel.

This essay, mindful of how often readers have raced past *The Road*'s opening page, lingers over it, taking a closer look at its dream sequence and the cave creature to which this leads. Heeding Johns-Putra's reminder that *The Road* is neither an allegory nor a parable but a thought experiment, open to varied responses, it argues that this monster reverberates with the eponymous road that is its principal setting. Associations that McCarthy conjures between the cave and the road suggest that what survives of the highway system also remains the terrain of this predator, the domain it scans for edible life. This, as we will see, becomes particularly evident through a motif of dripping water that intensifies just before the father dies. For these ominous drips, which also sometimes follow him into supermarkets and gas stations among other ruins of globalised capitalism, suggest that this creature remains at his shoulder, shadowing him, his appetites, and the actions these appetites inspire. Reflecting on the motif as it treats *The Road* as a thought experiment, this essay suggests that the creature on

the novel's opening page can be considered a barcode monster, spawned before the apocalypse, and that its weirdly mechanical "brain," seen pulsing inside "a dull glass bell," can be likened to a primitive computer that continues to harvest data from the road it scans. The creature that commences *The Road*, stalking its journey south, belongs to the wider response the novel makes to the immanent power over human desires that consumer capitalism has accumulated during McCarthy's lifetime.

Necessarily, then, the essay's argument moves from a close analysis of *The Road* to an account of the historical development of the commercial landscapes whose wreckage is navigated in the novel. Quoting extensively from the text itself, the opening section deepens the interpretation rehearsed above. It argues that in his description of this strange cave creature, with its mechanised brain, its black and white hue, its perpetual scanning of the world, McCarthy uncannily reassembles components from the barcode systems that first became a feature of everyday American life in the late 1960s. The second section of the article then turns to the history reassembled in this uncanny creature, exploring the development of the product scanning technology that helped to lubricate further the US consumer flows that accelerated so rapidly over the twentieth century. It shows how, not least in McCarthy's own home state of Tennessee, the introduction of self-service shopping systems soon inspired an anxious desire to understand and control the unknown consumer—a desire that, by the 1960s, helped persuade major US businesses to pool resources and commission new research into what became known as barcode technology. Understanding this in-person system of data gathering as an essential precursor for the online forms of surveillance capitalism that now dominate critical debate, the final pages of the essay then return to *The Road*. Close analysis of the text shows that the novel displays a gathering interest in bare tins and homemade stencils, in painted signs and handwritten labels, and in other objects that *The Road's* father, when scavenging, retrieves from the frozen circuits of commodity flow. In a context of unremitting horror, a world of hunger and predation, the novel here connects these unsurveillable foods to an unexpected and often fleeting return of slow talk, caloric satiety, and other experiences that can become endangered amid the consumer routines of today. Released from the distractions and negotiations evoked in the famous postwar US phrase "pester power," dialogue between *The Road's* father and son slows down. Bonds between them deepen, and their talk becomes philosophical and more illuminating for both. Of course, the price of this gain—catastrophe—is far too high, and absurdly so. But life after *The Road's* apocalypse does transpire, however inappropriately, as a context in which affective experiences long lost to consumerism return.

The Monster on the Road

And yet the cave creature is also exceptional: homo sapiens are responsible for all the acts of violence that take place in the book. Although many crimes are kept offstage, being identified by abandoned corpse stores among other grim aftermaths, they are always perpetrated by human actors. Hearsay about the “men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” among other unspeakable acts confirm that McCarthy, interested in reclaiming good and evil as moral absolutes, is also defining the latter in terms of rape and cannibalism, crimes in which some subordinate the bodies of others to their desires (McCarthy 193). Given this, when *The Road*'s mother likens all survivors to the “walking dead” early in the novel, the allusion looks ahead to those later threats that she will not live to see (McCarthy 57).² All but one of the monsters in the book resemble such Hollywood zombies. Lifeforms that lack “the organic articulation and teleological focus that we are prone to attribute to ourselves,” in Steven Shaviro's words, they project a vision in which human consciousness is defined by the needs and desires of the body (Shaviro 85).

On the opening page of *The Road*, however, we meet an unequivocal “It.” Juxtaposed in this uncanny creature are divergent components, from bells to spiders' eyes, but very little in the way of an anthropomorphic element. Its dwelling-place, too, seems to belong to a European fairytale. It exists in stark contrast to the human habitats—the abandoned malls, warehouses and other roadside ruins—haunted by other predatory forces in the novel. From the beginning of the father's dream these fairytale elements are clear. As night falls like “the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world,” a “child” who may or may not be his son takes hold of the father's hand and leads him into a cave. Inside, as the “light” plays “over the wet flowstone walls,” *The Road* likens the duo to “pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast.” Their brief and mysterious quest then leads them to “a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake.” “On the far shore,” we become aware of

a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark. (McCarthy 1)

A few isolated elements in this description do come close to suggesting that, like the zombie threat later on, *The Road*'s cave creature may mirror human behaviour of some sort. Just as its shadow joins that of the father on the wall of the cave, so the creature's oxymoronically “sightless” scanning of its environment might

seem to mimic the latter's nervous habit of using his binoculars to monitor the horizon for threats. Yet these similarities soon prove minor. Taken as a whole, *The Road*'s opening description disrupts such direct comparisons, maintaining an air of confusion and mystery around its opening vision. Even any allusions to *Beowulf* that arguably become apparent in the sequence already arrive in a scrambled and unknowable form. That is to say, *The Road* in general can be said to invert this Old English poem's epic movement from Grendel to the dragon: it introduces its cannibals only after its introductory dream sequence has led us to its "crouching" cave dweller. Yet the opening page, while initiating the novel's broader interest in counterpointing *Beowulf*, also inaugurates its tendency to interweave such allusions with all sorts of unexpected and jarring elements. The slow and pendulous movement of the creature's head, like its subterranean dwelling-place and its apparent hunting of humans, may evoke the monsters of the long medieval poem. But as McCarthy zooms further in, providing a description of its physiognomy that seems both forensic and freighted with meaning, a range of different associations become apparent.

These unexpected features are made visible by the light that floods the cave and throws the shadows on the wall. For this light, which remains unspecified but which clearly prefigures the "fire" that the father will tell his son he carries inside him, reveals that the cave creature is far from robust. As it illuminates the creature's "bowels" and "beating heart," it exposes an organism that is in fact "pale and naked and translucent." The monster bears the hallmarks, in other words, of a troglobite, a species unaccustomed to the light in which it now finds itself. Uncannily, though, some moments pass before the creature recoils. Looking straight into the invading beams, it waits long enough to display all the internal organs that press against its see-through skin. As if viewed in an X-ray, its brain, pulsing "in a dull glass bell," seems especially robotic, far more mechanical than its medieval surrounds. The overwhelming impression thus proves to be one of paradox. This is a creature that cannot see but looks at us before it slouches away. It is a troglobite identified with the light that is cast upon it. Primordial, untouched by human development, its body remains nonetheless mechanical in form.

In *Monster Culture* (1996), the influential essay cycle that Cody Jones has called the "ur-text of teratological cultural analysis" (Jones 357), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that such paradoxes lie at the heart of notions and manifestations of monstrosity in human cultures. Monsters, Cohen suggests, must by necessity remain "uncertain," "a breaker of category" knowable "only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis" (ix-x). Nonetheless, Cohen continues, as they "stand... at the threshold of... becoming," they are also liable to cast these paradoxes as riddles, continuing to "ask us why we have created them" (Cohen 20). Bordering on outrage, they

demand answers even as they continue to present us with contradictions we cannot possibly solve.

The Road's cave creature exemplifies this difficult combination. Occupying a liminal position, the paradoxes that it incarnates all demand explanation. Its menace and fragility, its blind scanning of its surrounds, and its ancient and mechanical body parts all invite Cohen's question, suggesting a need to find out why our culture could have created such a form. Yet both here and later, when the father and son trudge through the ruins of the road, the novel ensures that its initial dream of the cave and the waiting creature remains mysterious. It never connects either to any single incident or memory.

Even as it protects this mystery, however, some suggestive affinities still surface. A simile likening the stone walls to "the inward parts of some granitic beast" proves particularly intriguing, implying as it does that the creature and the cave are part of a single organism. This possibility—the possibility that when they see the monster's eyes the father and son are already standing inside its body—is strengthened by the references to dripping water that follow. In these "deep stone flues," we learn, "the water dripped and sang," a musical rhythm that we might imagine smooths "the wet flowstone walls." As if to add to this curious impression of vocal erosion, the novel then traces the water to the creature's "dripping mouth." The "dripping" thus comes to seem more monstrous than natural, an uncanny paralanguage by which the creature at once speaks and shapes the dark pathways that serve its predatory lair. The impression is of a creature that holds a power or physiological control over a network of pathways beyond the cramped unlit corner where we first see it.

It thus seems significant that this dripping sound should return as the novel nears its tragic denouement. Throughout the narrative *The Road's* father has been acutely aware that the road is a place of danger as well as a route to safety, and that he and his son must always remain mindful of the risk of capture to which their journey exposes them. Just before his death this balance becomes impossible to maintain. As *The Road's* father seems increasingly defenceless, the motif that began inside the cave reoccurs. "Drip of water. A fading light. Old dreams encroached upon the waking world. The dripping was in the cave." (McCarthy 299) If the motif's return at this point seems fitting or unsurprising, however, this may be because other allusions in the novel have also identified the cave creature, and its strange power of oversight, with the road beside which the father dies. At one point described as a "black shape... running from dark to dark," the road can even look like the troglobite, or its shadow at least, and it provides the setting from which we hear the howl of "something imponderable," inhuman and "without cognate," shifting "out there in the dark" (McCarthy 279). And yet this external resemblance between the modern road and ancient creature only echoes the fact that, as we have seen,

the latter's physiology is far more mechanical than its medieval surrounds might lead us to expect. Departing sharply from the fairytale dwelling-place where it is found, uncanny elements in the original description of this monster have, in other words, already indicated that it harbours a surprising affinity with the world outside the cave, with the real world of the desolate road and the desolate commercial spaces in which McCarthy's father and son spend their waking hours.

As such—and without giving a final answer to Cohen's question of why this monster was made—it can seem as if the creature's medieval aspects have here become interwoven with an unexpected ability to perform a kind of mechanical observation of the wider American world. Indeed, just as *The Road's* account of its paradoxically blind vision suggests a system of unverifiable surveillance, so the eyes themselves, vividly described as “dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders,” evoke lines of DNA, a vast harvest of information from the world it does and does not see. The “human head in a cakebell” that the father and son stumble across in an abandoned drugstore—a strange duplicate of the troglobite's brain—would seem to confirm its links with the commercial sites that lead off from the road (McCarthy 195). The question thus becomes what this creature is scanning for—what exactly these scans, like its pulsing brain in a box, might bring to mind. One answer—barcode technology—might jar and seem surreal. Yet much of *The Road* is deliberately incongruous. The actions of this creature—its association with the road, its mechanical and monitoring consciousness, its unseeing eyes—do suggest the new technological modes of monitoring customers that we will turn to in the essay's following section.

At this stage it seems important to emphasise that consumer sites such as this present *The Road's* starving protagonists with constant reminders of a lost American world of impulse and plenty. Ruins of the “car country” that was the “nation's signature landscape,” in Christopher W. Wells' phrase, they recall a world in which hunger characteristically manifested itself not as need or want but overstimulated desire (Wells 289). And of course, over very long shifts, McCarthy's father holds another remnant of this lost world in his hands. The grocery cart whose bar handle he pushes along offers a persistent reminder of what the road once was. It constantly rekindles memories of weekly odysseys through aisles upon aisles of pre-packaged food. And because it resembles a primitive car of sorts, it also constantly recalls the constant stimulation of caloric desire that took place on the highway network itself. Unspoken throughout the father and son's pilgrimage South is their knowledge that the road had once presented them (or those from an older generation) with a cornucopia of neon or backlit ads for food. Because it constantly draws the cart away from the road, even the “wonky” wheel might appear an unwelcome

echo of a world in which motorists frequently acted on such appetising signs, turning their steering wheels to the right to grab some suboptimal snack.

But this was also, of course, a world that the novel wishes to burn to the ground. In writing *The Road*, by his own account, McCarthy acted out a vision that—as he told Oprah Winfrey in a rare TV appearance in 2008—came to him while he was staying in a hotel in El Paso with his son. One night,

it was probably about two in the morning, and I went over and just stood and looked out the window at this town. There was nothing moving but I could hear the trains going through, a very lonesome sound. I just had this image of what this town might look like in 50 or 100 years... fires up on the hill and everything being laid to waste, and I thought a lot about my little boy. So I wrote two pages. And then about four years later I realised that it wasn't two pages of a book, it was a book, and it was about that man, and that boy. (qtd. in Adams)

The parallels between this memory of *The Road*'s original inspiration and its opening page are illuminating. In both scenes, one remembered and one novelistic, the father is restless, and his son's deep sleep allows him to ease his imagination slightly and contemplate future scenarios he knows he must later keep to himself. Even within this context of relative imaginative freedom, however, McCarthy remains as reluctant to name the cause of the apocalypse as he is in *The Road* itself. As in the novel, too, this reluctance fuels speculation. Just as we might wonder whether, as he gazed on El Paso at night and imagined it on fire, McCarthy saw any homeless people, or any grocery carts next to their sleeping bodies, so we might also ponder the likelihood that the "lonesome" sound of the trains took the form of the warning bells so redolent of the American railroad.

Such possibilities are necessarily speculative, attempts to deal with the gaps that McCarthy left unfilled. Nonetheless, conclusions of a more definite nature can be drawn. We can certainly infer that, not only in *The Road* itself but also when recounting its moment of creation, McCarthy remains focused far less on the why than the how of disaster. Although it is in fact impossible to separate the two, as a novelist he is at liberty to gloss over the cause of the apocalypse in favour of watching it unfold slowly over the consumerist world that surrounds him. And in the context of this artistic interest in watching "everything being laid to waste," of course, "everything" refers to the built urban space of El Paso, the backlit arrows and other stimuli of a consumerist world that beckons outside his hotel window. Given this stated preoccupation, it seems imperative that we now turn to the transformations and intensifications that took place in this commercial world in the years when McCarthy was writing *The Road*, relating these, in turn, to its longer history over the course of his own long American life.

2-D Surveillance: Barcodes and Personal Data

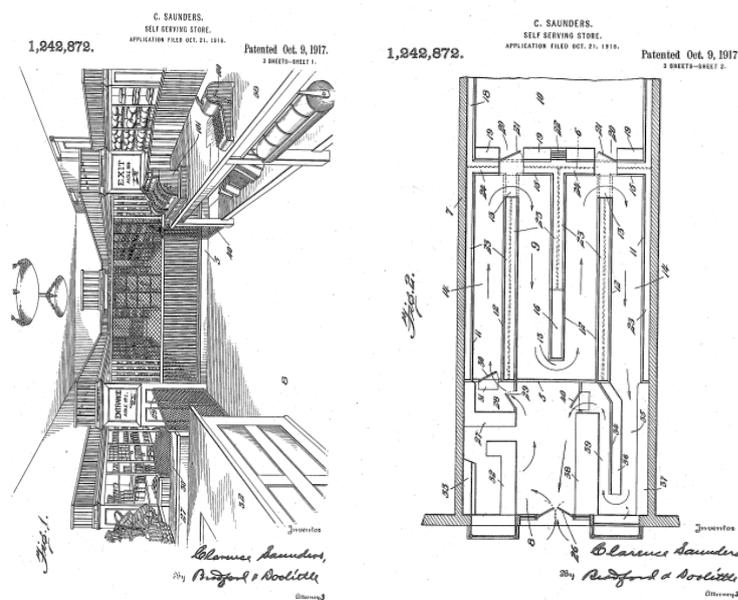
In the 1960s a consortium of major US supermarkets, inspired by an initial patent that the inventor Joe Woodland had filed in 1949, invited bids from other firms to produce a more efficient and reliable version of what they called Universal Product Code (UPC) technology. Developers at IBM were at this time quick to see that the new laser capacities meanwhile being identified in California, though often spoken of as some kind of “science fiction death ray,” could actually help their new optical scanners deliver such more prosaic improvements (qtd. in Weightman). The ceremonial zapping of a pack of Wrigley’s chewing gum at a store in 1974 in Troy, Ohio, duly became what Gavin Weightman calls a “historic occasion,” a significant leap forward for the ever-globalising US economy.

Such fanfare, of course, did not last long. The small stamps of irregular columns and automatic numbers that came to be known as barcodes quickly faded into the background. Soon they would become a familiar feature of US everyday shopping, often overlooked. As they became more ubiquitous, the innumerable zaps that had followed the scanning of the first pack of gum attracted little notice. Indeed, it soon transpired that, light years away from the futuristic reputation of its internal laser, the UPC’s true superpower lay in its ability to disappear. Unnoticed by customers, tucked away in some discreet corner of the packages they handled, barcodes quietly eased the flow of consumer goods around the United States and, increasingly, the world.

Under a decade after their launch, then, barcodes had become a familiar feature of everyday US life, well on course to attaining their present ubiquity. Major US firms with no involvement in the original commission were quick to see how the new technology could expedite stock monitoring and checkout speeds. As a result, like the invention of the shopping carts or shipping containers that preceded them, barcodes quickly became one of the essential components of globalisation, a slightly hidden lubricant that smoothed the passage of goods from warehouse to private home via the self-serve store.³ But these major firms were also quick to grasp that, at the same time as it lubricated stock flow, UPC technology could generate vast datasets logging the everyday likes and dislikes of their customers. In time, indeed, this capacity to profile individuals could seem to eclipse the improved commodity flow for which barcodes had first been commissioned.

Commercial firms in the US became increasingly anxious about who their customers were, and how to monitor their movements, following their adoption of self-service approaches during the interwar years. In his influential patent of 1917, the Tennessee entrepreneur Clarence Saunders, founder of the Piggly Wiggly supermarket chain, already betrayed these anxieties (see Figures 1 and 2). At first his patent takes pains to boost the turn away from counter-based service, suggesting it will leave the customer free to move as she pleases among a “variety

of lines of goods.” Only a few sentences later, however, we find him introducing a one-way walking system as well as a “screened opening” that deters early exits. Among these attempts to reintroduce control, however, perhaps the most noteworthy is a network of hidden “passage-ways” that, indicated by number 23, his design places behind each line of public shelves. Not that Saunders is open about the purpose of these recesses. While he claims that they allow a “store walker” to “supervise the sales and inspect the amount of stock on hand without interfering with those who are making purchases,” the explanation seems far-fetched; it would be much cheaper to have this employee carry out such work from the shop floor, as supermarkets often still do. Saunders’ explanation was like that of an ad, appearing in the *New York Times*, in which another early self-service adopter assured readers that the only purpose of the turnstile at the entrance of the store was to “register the number of persons who enter each day” (“A Self-Service Grocery” 40). Both commercial statements, championing self-service, also volunteered explanations that stretched credulity, revealing their fear that the loss of the counter meant they would no longer know their customers.



Figures 1 and 2 (<https://patents.google.com/patent/US1242872A/en?q=US1242872>)

This anxiety is confirmed in the numerous ads for Piggly Wiggly that Saunders placed in regional newspapers between the wars. On the face of it these simply picture the genteel white housewife who was his ideal customer, erasing all other identities as he emphasises her purity and selflessness as a provider for her family. Like his customers, however, he knew that, even after the move toward self-service, food shopping in the South would remain a mixed affair, an activity in which, as Lisa Tolbert has shown, “white and black, rich and poor, men and women interacted on a daily basis,” and usually under the yoke of

segregation protocols designed to humiliate black clientele (Tolbert 183). It was against this background that Saunders would define his new self-service stores: as a space relatively free of Jim Crow's toxic signage, yet which somehow also remained a *de facto* white space, a store that his newspaper ads always filled with genteel white female shoppers and no one else. The fact that the most in the commercial world at the time continued to regard the self-service approach as a dangerous innovation, and an approach somewhat likelier to increase thefts than sales, add to the suspicion that the "store walker" described in Saunders' patent was always going to do a great deal more than simply monitor stock control. The recesses included in his patent take a big step toward the introduction of the store surveillance system that would in time become commonplace in US supermarkets. What they really offer is a way of following customers without seeming to disturb their new freedom of movement and choice.

If some new suspicions of the customer were thus apparent from the start of self-service history, becoming visible in its earliest patents and ads, then the wider applications of barcode data that emerged over the 1990s handed supermarkets some much better methods for addressing these old fears. As checkouts harvested ever more detailed data on what was selling where and what might thus be sold there again (Kumar 194), the growing use of loyalty schemes also allowed supermarkets to bring "names, addresses, purchasing behaviour, and lifestyles all together onto one record," building "a picture of someone's life," as Martin Evans suggested at the time (Evans 2). The process of "data matching," linking electronic point of sale information (POS) to individual loyalty scheme profiles, subsequently put stores on the path toward a computerised method of surveilling customers that would prove far less cumbersome or difficult to explain than the recesses Saunders squeezed into his blueprint. Coupons among other targeted discounts were often greeted in the 1990s as simple sales pitches, crude promotions that sought nothing but an immediate boost in sales. But as they chased receipts out of checkout printers or arrived through letterboxes in loyalty scheme updates, they actually helped add to the datasets that supermarkets were increasingly matching to the individual identities of their customers.

Advances in these behind-the-scenes applications of barcode technology meant that, by the 1990s, the cart itself was beginning to acquire a new and additional function. Hitherto such carts had been chiefly associated with the increased scale and volume of postwar US consumerism. Indeed, for Frank Cochoy and Catherine Grandclément-Chaffy, the cart was above all "a vast cavity which... asks only to be filled," inviting shoppers "to continue putting objects into it until it is full, or 'satiated'" (Cochoy and Grandclément-Chaffy 652–3). Overconsumption thus became the crucial addition Cochoy and Grandclément-Chaffy made to the understanding of the supermarket network that they developed from Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social* (2005). Where *Reassembling the Social* presents

the supermarket as a space that wants to “preformat . . . you to be a consumer, only a generic one... with an ability to *calculate* and to *choose*,” and which places before you various “plug-ins” you can “download on the spot to *become* locally and provisionally competent,” Cochoy and Grandclément-Chaffy focus on the particular “plug-in” of the cart whose inviting size they emphasise (Latour 209–10). A “vast cavity which... asks only to be filled,” the cart thus becomes for them a crucial catalyst of individual overconsumption, at once drawing shoppers toward their own choices and placing these on a scale of excess. Following advances in POS barcode technology in the 1990s, however, it becomes apparent that the “extremely generous volumetric” scale of the cart is more than a spur to overconsumption. Via barcodes it also provides the raw data for the supermarket to build a detailed portrait of the shopper. As “the cart invites” them “to continue putting objects into it until it is full,” UPC technology begins to feed lines of data into loyalty systems that generate a refined profile of who these shoppers are.

In consequence, some years before the algorithms of Google, Amazon and Facebook became notorious for personal intrusion, supermarkets could already seem a step ahead of their customers. Indeed, as they calibrated online discounts to anticipate the preferences of their clientele, they could appear a clear forerunner of the system of surveillance capitalism that, in the words of Shoshana Zuboff, “claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data” (Zuboff 8). Ever since the “data matching” of the 1990s paired purchase histories to individual profiles, barcodes have clearly helped usher in a new digital approach that anticipates the current system that, for Zuboff, “transforms the things that we have into things that have us in order that it might render the range and richness of our world, our homes, and our bodies as behaving objects for its calculations and fabrications on the path to profit.” And yet whereas “surveillance capitalists,” for Zuboff, by necessity “impose their will backstage,” both the commercial uses and the practicalities of barcode technology have recently become a far more familiar part of everyday life (Zuboff 253). The UPC commission had stipulated in the 1960s that the winning design should remain under ten centimetres squared. While it had a practical benefit, enabling manufacturers to fit barcodes onto items as small as a packet of chewing gum, such minimal sizing was also motivated by a determination to ensure that this addition to the skin of the packaged product did not interfere with the aesthetic pitch this product made to passing supermarket customers.⁴ But as home computing technology improved, and as other kinds of organisations woke up to the potential uses of the POS data that the supermarkets had pioneered, barcodes began to step out of the shadows, no longer away facing away from customers. Prior to this point barcodes were “just there,” engineered to be ignored by most. Most Americans only hunted around for them if they were cutting saving coupons out of a newspaper or working at the checkout. But now, as the twenty-first century got underway, these UPCs became central to a series of examples

of what the sociologist George Ritzer terms “prosumption,” a sphere of activity in which “new technologies,” such as “the computer, Internet, ATMs, self-scanners,” and “sensors,” have enabled consumers to perform tasks “that they rarely, if ever, did before” (Ritzer 6).

Supermarkets, founded on the principle of self-service, stood at the vanguard of these advances. The prosumerist expectation of self-scanning your own barcodes, although increasingly ubiquitous across a range of other consumerist or social information points, demands the most rapid work rate of us in the depopulated checkout spaces of the old big box stores. Here, as customers move from the supermarket’s aisles into its self-scan area, finding a cubicle and pressing Start on the touchscreen, they are required to carry out a kind of quickfire deconstruction of a succession of commodity forms, approaching each one no longer in the capacity of its consumerist addressee but as its prosumerist processor. In other words, at the heart of a commercial context whose key components predate the internet systems on which Zuboff focuses, barcodes now enlist consumers in their own surveillance activity, requiring them to upload a detailed inventory of their purchases before they leave the store.

Yet as they upend their choices, inspect the base of cans, seek information about the content of these successive commodity forms, these customers also mirror the actions of *The Road*’s father. In the novel he is seen repeatedly looking as if behind the skin of the supermarket commodity. His focus frequently falls on the need to ascertain whether the food he has found is edible. Certain mainstays of the supermarket shelves, canned foods such as corned beef and ham, frankfurters and fruit salad, can seem almost miraculous in this work, happenstance placing them before him and allowing him to keep his son from starving for another day or so. Before he can receive this blessing, however, he must first deconstruct such goods. On pain of survival, he must look behind the skin of the packaged item, accessing the food itself to assess its safety. Desperation thus requires him to grapple with and understand the material character of foods he would once have thrown into an empty shopping cart.

A similar restoration occurs when, deep into their journey, the father comes across a “tiny paradise” in the form of an abandoned private bunker. Within, “walled with concrete block,” he finds “crate upon crate of canned goods.” The bounty before him come to seem more beneficent as the father realises that its original owner had a hand in labelling its contents:

He ducked under a lantern with a green metal shade hanging from a hook. He held the boy by the hand and they went along the stencilled cartons. Chile, corn, stew, soup, spaghetti sauce. The richness of a vanished world. Why is this here? the boy said. Is it real?

Oh yes. It’s real

He pulled one of the boxes down and clawed it open and held up a can of peaches. It's here because someone thought it might be needed. (McCarthy 147)

As he sees the work of the human hand, the evidence of a human agent providing for others, the father becomes less fearful, happier to accept the unexpected bounty. The effect is akin to that of the billboards, seen nearby, which have been “whited out” with paint so that people can scrawl “warnings” upon them. They, too, are “palimpsests,” overwriting the messages or descriptions of “goods which no longer existed” (McCarthy 135) with acts of human communication that revive a commitment to communal rather than singular survival.

When we encounter the supermarket “on the outskirts of the city,” McCarthy’s father seems almost optimistic about his new salvaging mission. Leaving the cart outside, he and his son “walk the littered aisles,” but in the “produce section in the bottom of the bins” they find only “a few ancient runner beans and what looked to have been apricots, long dried to wrinkled effigies of themselves.” Outside are only “a few shopping carts, all badly rusted.” The two return to the store without much hope of finding anything to sustain them:

By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. He sat and ran his hand around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola.

What is it, Papa?

It's a treat. For you.

What is it?

Here. Sit down.

He slipped the boy's knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said.

The boy took the can. It's bubbly, he said.

Go ahead. He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It's really good, he said.

Yes. It is. (McCarthy 22)

The drink, cocooned in the busted vending machine, is neither so “charred” nor “anonymous” as other canned goods in the book, and calling it “Coke” feels unavoidable. But the novel continues to withhold this name from the dialogue, and even its iconic skin can seem to melt away as it becomes just another “cold metal cylinder”: McCarthy’s father never mentions it by name and his narrative never refers to its famous colour. As with the tinned foods they eat elsewhere, however, the rise in the Coke’s nutritional value would seem to become curiously contingent on the deconstruction of its outside skin. With the rejection of its

packaging, indeed, new identities, no longer forged on consumerist patterns, become available to them. The drink leaves the son in raptures, and the father has time to take in and savour his delight. The barcode system of consumerist routine thus vanishes as the novel suggests the two are sharing a fundamental experience that is antithetical not just to the apocalypse but, before it, to the ordinary functioning of the supermarket in which they are lingering. Bypassing the packaging as well as the systems such packaging served, McCarthy imagines new and unusual kinds of family conversations about food.

In consequence, Coca-Cola, a foodstuff once taken as a byword for casual excess and a cause of the obesity epidemic, is grasped in the exchange not as a brand, ideology or problem but a material entity: liquid sugar that delays the boy's starvation. At this juncture, indeed, McCarthy's father believes he has discovered the last remaining Coke can in the world and, although they find more later, its singularity provides the basis for a sacrifice on his part. Parental love and religious devotion interweave as he passes it to the malnourished son in whom, he says elsewhere, the "word of God" lives on.

The Road's supermarket scene is not a simple exercise in nostalgia. On one level urging thanksgiving, inviting readers to appreciate the fragile plenty of western life, on another it laments the ease with which these comforts are today overused. The father makes his sacrifice amid the wreckage of a checkout and a vending machine—in the shadow, in other words, of an old American scene, planned around pester power, in which the parent's main task had been to placate the child or find a way of saying no. McCarthy clearly yearns not to recover this lost world of plenty but to use it as a stage for new experiences—experiences which that world once thwarted. A test and an act of devotion, a direct line between pleasure and satisfaction, and a more generous mode of fatherhood, all impose themselves on a setting where they would once have seemed wildly out of place. Disaster, seen elsewhere in lurid detail, peels away the supermarket's old skin of icon and image, allowing McCarthy's father and son to recover a new and more pastoral way of being. Thanks to the supermarket's destruction, strange as it might sound, they can linger over the Coke. He can smell it like fine wine, and his son can savour a taste those before apocalypse overused or overlooked.

Conclusion

In the years before and after *The Road* appeared in 2007, several science fiction novels imagined worlds in which excess information leads to the demise of individual difference. As early as 2000, in Ken MacLeod's *Cosmonaut Keep*, the massive overproduction of generic digital data already defines life on earth, and we hear that other interplanetary cultures have come to regard homo sapiens as "great lumbering spambots, corrupted servers," little more than "slightly

varied replicas of ourselves” (qtd. in Shaviro 2014). Written in the Internet 1.0 era of static webpages and dial-up connections, *Cosmonaut Keep*, as Shaviro has suggested, suggests not only that email and other spam constitute a “virus” but also that this virus has become what “we are,” reconstituting human identity into predictable genres of response (Shaviro 2014). More recently, in *Hell Sans* (2022), a second Scottish novelist, Ever Dundas, pictures an authoritarian future in which democratic acquiescence is secured via billboards and other signs written in a magical font. The command “Be Your Best Self,” repurposed from Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-8), is paraded everywhere in capitalised HellSans, but while the eponymous typeface reduces some who read it to thoughtless bliss, it triggers terminal allergies in others, labelling them deviants. Resistance thus takes two forms. The novel’s heroes often carry out surgery on their personal robots, disrupting the collection of the data that will tell them what their “best self” is. Meanwhile, however, unknown vandals scour the city, “tearing down the retro hoardings, spray-painting serifs on the HellSans emblazoned across all cars, shops, warehouses” (Dundas 449). Their vandalism is protective: it shields deviants from the toxic font. But for those immune to such negative effects, and for whom such signs inspire only formulaic bliss, it also restores a capacity for individual feeling. Defacing the authoritative signs of HellSans also attacks the concept of the “better” self, predicated on your personal data, on which such propaganda insists.

This essay has argued that a similar territory is charted in *The Road*. At moments it, too, draws satisfaction from the destruction of a world organised around anticipatable consumerist desire. Admittedly, in keeping with its status as a thought experiment, this vision remains far more conflicted throughout McCarthy’s novel. Pleasures he takes in the return of fatherly bonds, nutritional satisfaction and slow talk always exist in a delicate and frightening tension with the horrors he depicts, and indeed with his failure to imagine an enduring female presence. Conflicted as it is, however, his novel never succumbs to sensationalism. Although it may reflect the assumptions of a writer whose life has coincided with a period of unprecedented material progress, *The Road* is never ethically reckless. Its view of suffering and the pain of unmet need is clear. Nonetheless McCarthy also finds room in his novel to explore how, when we freeze the rapid circuits of commodity flow, certain feelings, including the feeling of hunger, may be positively reclaimed. He finds ways for his story to become something more than a cautionary tale, something as well as a meditation on loss and pain. He allows it to express a nostalgia deeper than the nostalgia you might expect, a yearning for the world before the world just destroyed. He imagines the old kinds of talk and feelings apocalypse might restore. When this happens in *The Road*, moreover, it is as if the novel stepped outside the range of the barcode monster that it conjures on its first page. It is as though the encounter with homemade and homegrown

objects in the novel—the father's resourceful eye for foods with no barcode and no prospect of feeding a personal dataset—were McCarthy's equivalent to the disruptive robot surgery and guerrilla defacements of *Hell Sans*. They, too, thwart a system of data retrieval and predicted desire, in the process restoring a notion of heroic, transformational individuality to the novel.

Notes

¹ For critical readings focused on nuclear holocaust, see Hantke (2013) and Sheikh (2019). Approaches that read the novel as a comment on the Anthropocene include Monbiot (2007) and Stark (2013).

² For a fuller exploration of this cinematic allusion, see Cooper, 548.

³ For more on the history of the shipping container, see Levinson (2016).

⁴ For more on the consumer appeal central to commodity packaging in this period, see Logermann (2019).

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Biography

Andrew Warnes is a Professor of American Studies in the School of English at the University of Leeds. His previous work has focused on representations of food and desire in American literature and culture, and his most recent books are *American Tantalus: Horizons, Happiness and the Impossible Pursuits of US Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2014) and *How the Shopping Cart Explains Global Consumerism* (California, 2018). He is currently working on questions of how we read, and the place of English or literature studies, in an age of digital culture.