

John Hillcoat by Jason Wood



A characteristically uncompromising film, John Hillcoat's adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Road*, depicts a planet in the throes of a seemingly irreversible demise. An unforgiving world, familiar from those previously evoked in *Ghosts... of the Civil Dead*, *To Have and To Hold* and *The Proposition*, the savage outlook is this time leavened by the faintly perceptible notes of optimism that Hillcoat found central to the book: 'The bleakness for me is just a backdrop, and the gestures towards hope that the film makes are that much more special because of the tremendous obstacles that the characters are up against.' Hillcoat's most high-profile assignment yet, *The Road* can also be seen as a summation of the director's fascination with desperate people in hostile situations, who are driven to extremes of behaviour in order to survive.

A graduate of Australia's Swinburne Film School, where he produced the celebrated shorts *The Blonde's Date With Death* and *Frankie and Johnny*, John Hillcoat went on to

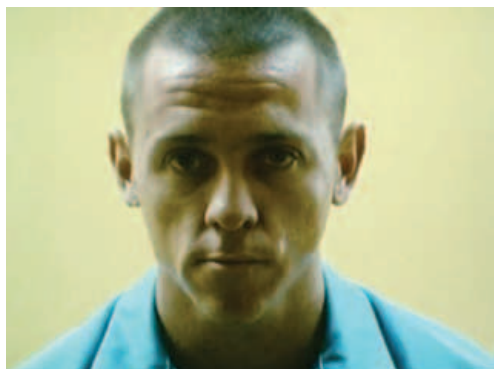
forge a successful career as a director and editor of music videos for The Birthday Party, INXS, Crowded House and Depeche Mode. *Ghosts... of the Civil Dead* was his first foray into features and marked the arrival of a distinctive and visceral filmmaking talent.

Nominated for nine Australian Film Institute Awards, *Ghosts... of the Civil Dead* was born of three years of exhaustive research into maximum-security prisons. Based on actual events that occurred in the project's gestation period, the film, an incisive and biting piece of polemical social commentary, also draws extensively on the writings and experiences of Jack Henry Abbott who, after a lifetime of incarceration, hanged himself in his cell. Abbott also gave the film its title, writing, 'As long as I am nothing but a ghost of the civil dead, I can do nothing.' Michel Foucault was another influence, particularly the writer's theory that the prison structure is an agent of the state to legitimise the use of violent and excessive force against its citizens.

Set within the despairing confines of Central Industrial Prison, a privatised, state-of-the-art correctional unit surrounded by a vast and inhospitable desert, the film opens during a lockdown situation, in which all prisoners are returned to their cells with privileges denied. Unfolding in flashback, following the formation of a committee founded to report on the lead up to the incident, the film focuses on the activities of inmate Wenzil (Dave Field), Officer David B. Yale (Mike Bishop), and a maniacal psychopath (Nick Cave, shorn of his trademark crow-black mane) in their stoking of tension, conflict, retribution and violence.

Co-written by Hillcoat and producer Evan English, the film was produced by the ironically named Correctional Services (in association

with *Outlaw Values*), and was made on the understanding that all the 'artistic participants' retained creative and economic control. This would in part explain the stark documentary aesthetic and its refusal to sweeten the portrait of a corrupt and dehumanising prison scheme that adopts a strategy of violence and humiliation in the name of discipline and control. Establishing a working relationship with Chris Kennedy, the production designer who would become integral to Hillcoat's nihilistic vision, *Ghosts... of the Civil Dead* also cemented the enduring alliance with Nick Cave, who as well as appearing in front of the camera, co-composed the film's ethereal score with Blixa Bargeld and Mick Harvey. Cave and Hillcoat first met in Melbourne in the late 1970s and bonded over similar interests in music and literature.



Ghosts... of the Civil Dead

Not emerging until almost ten years later, *To Have and To Hold* was greeted with great expectation, but regarded as a disappointment. Travelling extensively on the festival circuit and given a limited release in a number of territories, the project signalled an ambitious undertaking fatally undone by an apparent lack of conviction on the part of its makers. Hillcoat is himself dismissive, claiming that 'it has the distinction of being flawed in every department'.

Jack (Tchéky Karyo), a projectionist working in a small village on the Sepik River, in Papua New Guinea, appears to enjoy a bucolic

existence. Passing the days screening violent action movies to the captivated locals at a makeshift cinema, Jack shares his relatively tranquil life with his alluring wife, Rose (Anni Finsterer), and a number of local associates. Two years later, after a tragic boating accident, a chance meeting in a Melbourne bookshop with a romantic novelist named Kate (Rachel Griffiths) re-ignites the flames of passion. Bearing an uncanny resemblance to Jack's deceased spouse, Kate finds herself the subject of a whirlwind courtship and travels back with Jack to his remote idyll. After an initial honeymoon period it soon becomes clear that Jack's feelings are the result of a process of emotional transference, and with the local youths' thirst for violent images becoming increasingly insatiable, events begin to spiral dangerously out of control.

Further establishing a motif of having location function as a character in its own right, this brooding tale of obsessive, ill-fated love again addresses issues relating to isolation and violence. Clearly favouring atmosphere and tone over a wholly credible narrative, the film's two protagonists, though well played, are also a little too thinly sketched. Hillcoat's frank appraisal of his own film is, however, perhaps a little harsh. Sumptuously shot by Andrew de Groot, the film exerts a strange fascination and builds to a memorable denouement. The Cave, Bargeld and Harvey score also worms its way under the skin and the film is notable for coaxing Scott Walker from a self-imposed artistic exile to perform on the soundtrack.

Jointly inspired by his combination of cruel realism and poetry, Hillcoat and Cave conspired in their ambition to adapt Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. A recreation of the life of the legendary outlaw that synthesises poetry and prose, the attempts to acquire the rights were scuppered by the sudden and unexpected success of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Retaining a similarly intoxicating blend of brutality and lyricism, Hillcoat's next film, *The Proposition*, would not arrive until five years later.



The Proposition

Steeped in admiration for a number of 1970s American westerns (the spirit of Peckinpah, whose *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* is visually referenced, looms large), Cave and Hillcoat's primary aim was to embrace the history of Australia and its own genre of bush-ranging films. 'I thought the ingredients of struggling with the climate, the clash of cultures, that kind of lyrical, mythical quality of the power of the landscape hadn't been fully explored,' commented Hillcoat. Originally enlisted to write the score, Cave's impatience with the length of time it was taking for a script to be completed precipitated his own undertaking of the task. The result, later claimed to have been written in a little over three weeks, is a remarkably sparse yet intelligent analysis of savagery, tenderness and beauty. Set around the end of the nineteenth century, it pits the British administration in a desolate corner of the Australian outback against a family of Irish bushrangers, with the native aboriginal population aligned with and against both.

A British lawman dispatched to bring order to the colonies at any cost manages to capture Mikey (Richard Wilson) and Charlie (Guy Pearce), two younger members of the notorious Burns Brothers gang. Dispensing his own brand of barbaric justice to men wanted for various acts of general atrocity, the lawman, Captain Stanley (Ray Winstone), explains to Charlie that it is the elder brother, Arthur (Danny Huston), that the authorities really want. The proposition is thus struck. If Charlie brings in Arthur by Christmas Day (seven days hence), Mikey's life will be spared. If not, he will be

hanged. An exchange that will involve the death of at least one brother, Charlie's thankless dilemma is further complicated by a circling coterie of mercenary bounty hunters, led by the reptilian Jellon Lamb (John Hurt). Meanwhile, Captain Stanley also grapples with his own tormentors: arrogant superiors and incompetent subordinates, a desperately subdued wife (Emily Watson), and the debilitating migraines that hint at his own sense of failure concerning the enormity of his task.

Marshalling fine performances from an impressive ensemble cast, with Pearce, for whom Cave wrote the role as well as lobbying for his participation, especially outstanding, *The Proposition* boasts numerous technical merits. It is beautifully shot, with French cinematographer Benoît Delhomme teasing out the contrasting properties of the outback (shooting largely took place in Winton, Queensland with the British performers suffering terribly in the heat), while Craig Walmsley's sound design exists in perfect harmony with the profoundly melancholic and dread-inducing Nick Cave/Warren Ellis score.



The Proposition

Violent, though never for a moment gratuitous (slow-motion is avoided and, in one instance, the camera pans outside a room where a beating is taking place, registering the horror on the face of a bystander forced to listen to the cries of the victim), the film is at pains to depict the moral hopelessness of the times in which the characters exist, linking them directly to their environment's unforgiving elements. Hillcoat recalled, 'We wanted to show all the kinds of aggression from that time, including

the black-on-black violence. For us, the film was about the physical and psychological effects of violence and we didn't want to shy away from how brutal those times were. What we wanted to linger on was not the violence itself, but how people are affected by it.'

Certainly one of the finest films to emerge from Australia in recent years, *The Proposition* was met with almost unanimous critical acclaim. Writing in *Sight and Sound*, Nick Roddick equated it with the first years of the Australian cinema renaissance in the 1970s, 'where the tension between a hostile landscape and a country in search of a civilised identity, between freedom and compromise, forged a new mythic structure'.

Having read Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* in manuscript form (*Blood Meridian* is credited as another inspiration for *The Proposition*) Hillcoat was in a favourable position to avoid a repeat of the Michael Ondaatje experience. By the time the novel had chimed with the public and Joel and Ethan Coen had translated the author's *No Country For Old Men* to the screen, Hillcoat was already signed up to direct. Initially wary of the challenge of bringing the world McCarthy depicts to the screen, and of sustaining the intensity of the Father/Son relationship at the heart of the novel for an entire film, Hillcoat adopted the 'overriding philosophy that it would be better to fall flat on my face rather than not try at all because it seemed too tough'.

A terrifying glimpse into a possible future, an unnamed man (Viggo Mortensen) and his son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) travel through a post-apocalyptic landscape, ten years after the world has been ravaged by an unspecified catastrophe that has eradicated all energy, power, vegetation, food and human decency. The road the pair travels is littered with corpses and its surrounding ash-grey landscapes are patrolled by marauding gangs who feast on the flesh of the living in order to survive. Following the once magnificent American highways west towards the ocean, the pair seeks refuge in

the woods and abandoned structures they find along the way. Food and comfort is minimal, but there are odd moments of relief and the innate goodness of the young boy acts as a spur for the man to carry on.



The Road

Diverting from the source material only in the occasional flashbacks to the man's life with his wife (Charlize Theron) and in its expansion of minor characters, *The Road* functions effectively as a chilling morality tale and as a road movie, horror film and compelling love story. What is perhaps most impressive about the endeavour is the relative avoidance of CGI and the attendant clichés of the apocalypse genre, in favour of an approach more firmly grounded in reality.

Founded on Hillcoat's desire to create a frighteningly familiar world – with the image of the millions of homeless as a guiding visual principle – the production team, headed by Chris Kennedy, decided to look at 'the small apocalypses that have happened already'. Shooting in a post-Katrina New Orleans, Oregon, Mount St. Helens and Pennsylvania, Hillcoat captures a natural and authentic sense of devastation and deprivation. 'For the crew, these locations lent an added poignancy, but for the actors also it was something else for them to naturally react to. When half of your crew have been through the experience of Katrina it offers an incredible series of parallels with the story you are trying to tell.' A number of images in the film are also genuine, including the 70mm Imax shot of abandoned

boats on the freeway, taken two days after Katrina hit. The billowing smoke that appears in the background of a number of sequences is reproduced from news footage of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.

The approach to graphic imagery is again minimalist and deliberately low key. The sequence featuring the discovery of a cellar housing humans captured and kept for human consumption is all the more terrifying for what is indicated rather than actually revealed. Perhaps the most disturbing moment is when one of the cannibalistic hunters (Garret Dillahunt) feasts his eyes upon the boy and hungrily sniffs his scent. Hillcoat, with economy and subtlety, suggests that the man's physical and mental state is more animal than human.

Having previously left lengthy gaps between projects, John Hillcoat's rising reputation and the high visibility of *The Road* seem likely to ensure that he will not be absent from our screens for long. He has been linked to a string of projects. He is definitely planning a fifth collaboration with Nick Cave (who composed the score for *The Road* with Warren Ellis), who will return to scriptwriting duties with *The Wettest Country in the World*. John Hillcoat promises it will be a comedy.

JASON WOOD is a film programmer and contributor to *Sight and Sound* and the *Guardian*. He has also published several books on cinema.

John Hillcoat filmography

[feature film directing credits only]

1988

GHOSTS... OF THE CIVIL DEAD

Script: Nick Cave, Gene Conkie, Evan English, John Hillcoat and Hugo Race. Photography: Paul Goldman and Graham Wood. Production Design: Chris Kennedy. Editing: Stewart Young. Music: Blixa Bargeld, Nick Cave and Mick Harvey. Players: David Field (Wenzil), Mike Bishop (David Yale), Chris DeRose (Grezner), Kevin Mackey (Glover), Dave Mason (Lilly), Nick Cave (Maynard), Bogdan Koca (Waychek), Freddo Dierck (Robbins), Vincent Gil (Ruben), Ian Mortimer (Jack), Mick King (Edwin Neal), Angelo Papadopoulos (John Bird). Produced by Evan English. 93 mins

1996

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

Script: Gene Conkie and John Hillcoat. Photography: Andrew de Groot. Production Design: Chris Kennedy. Editing: Stewart Young. Music: Blixa Bargeld, Nick Cave and

Mick Harvey. Players: Tchéky Karyo (Jack), Rachel Griffiths (Kate), Steve Jacobs (Sal), Anni Finisterer (Rose), David Field (Stevie), Larry Lavai (James), John Parinjo (Noah), Ura Eri (Gabby). Produced by Denise Patience. 99 mins

2005

THE PROPOSITION

Script: Nick Cave. Photography: Benoît Delhomme. Production Design: Chris Kennedy. Editing: Jon Gregory. Music: Nick Cave and Warren Ellis. Players: Guy Pearce (Charlie Burns), Ray Winstone (Captain Stanley), Danny Huston (Arthur Burns), Emily Watson (Martha Stanley), Richard Wilson (Mike Burns), John Hurt (Jellon Lamb), David Wenham (Eden Fletcher), Noah Taylor (Brian O'Leary), David Gulpilil (Jacko), Robert Morgan (Sergeant Lawrence). Produced by Chris Brown, Chiara Menage and Cat Villiers. 104 mins

2009

THE ROAD

Script: Joe Penhall. Photography: Javier Aguirresarobe. Production

Design: Chris Kennedy. Editing: Jon Gregory. Music: Nick Cave and Warren Ellis. Players: Viggo Mortensen (Man), Kodi Smit-McPhee (Boy), Charlize Theron (Woman), Robert Duvall (Old Man), Guy Pearce (Veteran), Molly Parker (Motherly Woman), Michael Kenneth Williams (The Thief), Garret Dillahunt (Gang Member), Bob Jennings (Bearded Man), Agnes Herrmann (Archer's Wife). Produced by Paula Mae Schwartz, Steve Schwartz and Nick Wechsler. 119 mins

