

Oppressively Bleak 'The Road' Buries Great Viggo Mortensen Performance

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 25, 2009 - 1:13pm

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The long-delayed and highly-anticipated adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's "The Road" has moments of stark beauty and a typically fantastic lead performance from Viggo Mortensen, but the film ultimately misses its mark as a whole piece, coming off numbing in its bleak, repetitive view of the end of the world instead of inspiring emotionally or creatively.

In works like "All the Pretty Horses," "No Country For Old Men," and "The Road," author Cormac McCarthy has made his opinion of the human race crystal clear. We are headed for our end days as a time of decency among human beings has gone away. His highly-acclaimed novel "The Road" was the ultimate in bleak nihilism, giving readers a glimpse of how difficult it will be to hold on to any shred of humanity if we continue down our current path.



Viggo Mortensen stars in John Hillcoat's *The Road*, based on Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize winning novel.

Photo credit: Javier Aguirresarobe © The Weinstein Company, 2009.

In the film based on McCarthy's novel, adapted by writer Joe Penhall and director John Hillcoat, Mortensen plays "The Man" and Kodi Smit-McPhee plays "The Boy," two of the last decent people left on the planet after an undefined worldwide disaster. Through flashback, we see that the father and son were once joined by "The Mother" (Charlize Theron) but she gave up on hope and wandered off to certain death.

The story that follows is a mostly episodic series of encounters in which the two leads try to find food instead of being turned into it by bands of roving cannibals. They must constantly keep moving past enemies (including Garret Dillahunt), other wanderers (including Robert Duvall), and even thieves (including Michael Kenneth Williams of "The Wire"). The pair is headed for the coast. What will be there when they arrive? No one knows but they must keep moving to survive, wandering the physical and metaphorical road.

"The Road" is as oppressively bleak and numbing as any film you'll see this year. Even glimpses of hope like a bunker filled with food or a

warm, comforting house are turned into locations from which our heroes must flee. In McCarthy and Hillcoat's world, nothing good will last and we must use these moments not as an end but merely as fuel to try and get us to the next stop on the road.



Viggo Mortensen and Kodi Smit-McPhee star in John Hillcoat's *The Road*, based on Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize winning novel.

Photo credit: Macall Polay, 2929/Dimension Films, 2009.

The film version of McCarthy's novel illustrates a crucial difference between fiction and film. On the page, McCarthy's nihilism and arguable misanthropy is easier to take in page-sized portions. Very few people read a book from start to finish in one sitting and letting the horrors of this post-apocalyptic vision sink in with multiple reading sessions has an overall impact that's much stronger than being pounded over the head with them for two hours. On film, the repetitive, depressing drama becomes numbing.

And it's not merely a byproduct of the story never working on film (although it's possible that it never could have). There are some crucial mistakes in Hillcoat's film, most notably a very weak performance from Smit-McPhee, which wouldn't be that big a deal if he weren't in nearly every scene of the film. Hillcoat and Smit-McPhee make the mistake of playing the boy as far too whiny and needy for the audience to want to travel with him for over two hours. Viggo is typically great, giving the role his physical all, but he's also let down by an intrusive score that overpunctuates the action and drama instead of letting it register believably.

Ultimately, "The Road" is a film about how we must cling to our humanity even in the face of unspeakable misery or risk extinction as a species. A noble theme, for sure, but a hard one to carry for an entire film without becoming monotonous. There are elements of "The Road" that work - the cinematography, Mortensen's performance - but they are balanced by ones that simply feel like mistakes, almost all of which come from an over-emphasis on beating the audience over the head with the oppressive plight of the film's characters. Even just a few bumps in "The Road" can make it one not worth taking.

'The Road' stars Viggo Mortensen, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Charlize Theron, and Robert Duvall. It was adapted by Joe Penhall from the novel by Cormac McCarthy and directed by John Hillcoat. It opens on November 25th, 2009. It is rated R.



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