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NARRATIVAS MUTANTES



ANOMALÍA VIRAL EN LOS GENES DE LA FICCIÓN

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ARS DOCENDI

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**NARRATIVAS MUTANTES:
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Editura ARS DOCENDI – Universitatea din București
Editură cu profil academic și cultural recunoscută de
CONSILIUL NAȚIONAL AL CERCETĂRII ȘTIINȚIFICE

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Director: Ioan Crăciun
Copertă: Sabina Lucia Spinoiu
DTP: Cristian Dinu

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României
Narrativas mutantes: anomalía viral en los genes de la ficción
Coord.: Mihai Iacob, Adolfo R. Posada
Coed.: Borja Mozo Martín, Sorina Dora, Simion, Melania Stancu
București, Ars Docendi, 2018
Conține bibliografie
ISBN 978-606-998-024-8

I. Iacob, Mihai (coord.)
II. Posada, Adolfo R. (coord.)
III. Borja, Mozo Martín (ed.)
IV. Simion, Sorina Dora (ed.)
V. Stancu, Melania (ed.)

82.09

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Tipărit la Editura Ars Docendi

CORMAC MCCARTHY MUTATIVE: METAPHORIC FOR READING, LITERARY TRANSLATION, AND FILMIC ADAPTATION

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Lo mutante es una escritura diferente [...] es pasar
a algo nuevo¹.

Vicente Luis Mora

The words of the book swam off the page eerily [...] a whole new style seemed to be seeking expression here.

Cormac McCarthy, *Suttree* (1992a)

The core topic of the International Congress on Mutant Fiction: «Mutant Alert: Viral Anomaly in Fiction Genes» presents an opportunity to revisit iconic American writer Cormac McCarthy via the trope of mutation, providing the basis for a consideration that alerts us to varieties of transmutation that issue from his novels, dramas, and screenplays. *Mutation* here, which derives from a recent critic-literary taxonomy in Spain to categorize a group of breakthrough writers², is bent toward metaphoric for the transformative act and products of reading, literary translation and filmic adaptation (including subtitling and dubbing), as well as for the mutative or reshaping potentialities on the literary and filmic polysystems (in Spanish) when new works from another language and culture (American English) are incorporated, and ultimately on the polysystems of literary and filmic criticism as well. The mutative potential that Cormac McCarthy first unleashes on his readers in English, which is then continued by Spanish translator Luis Murillo Fort, and film directors the Coen Brothers and Ridley Scott, can serve as a useful theoretical heuristic for understanding what reading, translation and adaptation *do* to a literary text. The mutative examples to be considered include: McCarthy's mutation of conventional American English into idio-socio-regiolects; reading as a coping strategy that mutates the original text intralingually; genealogical sequencing of evil and gender mutation across two novels and a film script; interlingual mutation from English to Spanish; intersemiotic mutation from novel to film; and intermodal academic mutation.

¹ Epigraph taken from remarks by author and critic Vicente Luis Mora in his Plenary Lecture «La literatura mutante desde fuera (dentro de un orden). Recepción y crítica» (2016).

² See Ferré and Ortega (2007) and Mora (2007).

McCarthy's Mutation of Conventional American English into Idio-Socio-Regiolects

The dialogue of the characters in *Outer Dark* (1993), *Blood Meridian* (1992b), and *The Sunset Limited* (2006b), two novels and a trans-genre novel-in-dramatic-form, exemplify McCarthy's stylized mutation of conventional American English into various dialects, or more specifically, into idio-socio-regiolects of:

1. the southern Appalachian mountainfolk of East Tennessee;
2. the filibusters hunting aboriginal scalps along the Texas-California-Mexico border in 1849-1850;
3. a transplant from rural Louisiana to a black ghetto in New York City.

The literary mutation of standard or conventional American dialects into speech that is peculiar to characters, groups and settings amounts to an intralingual alienation and foreignization, to borrow from Schleiermacher to Venuti in the field of translation studies. In *Outer Dark*, for example, standard discourse and dialect such as «When you have finished and are in bed» is mutated by McCarthy into the Appalachian-folksy «When ye get done and get abed» (1993: 62); «don't get it dirty because later nobody will want to buy it» is turned into «don't black it to where nobody won't have it» (1993: 67); and «You should have known that he would play a dirty trick on you» is transformed into «You ort to have knowed one'd do ye dirt» (1993: 102). Similar dialectal deviation from the standard abounds in *Blood Meridian*, as in the following examples: «Gentlemen, said Toadvine, I'll bet I know what's going on», recast as the substandard «Gentlemens, said Toadvine, I'll guarangoddamntee ye I know what that there is about» (1992b: 79); «You may not like him», converted into «Mayhaps he aint to your liking» (1992b: 122); and «What a silly thing to do», slanged humorously into the scatological «Aint that the drizzlin shits» (1992b: 90). Finally, in *The Sunset Limited* standard American English dialect is mutated into the following black ex-con, ex-addict slang examples (italics added): «Every time the conversation gets a little heated, you leave» becomes «Ever time the *dozens* gets a little heavy you got to go»³; «I don't mean half way, either» is re-shaped as «I dont mean *chippied*, neither» (2006b: 14); and «You think I'm going to put you in an awkward situation» mutates into «You think I'm fixin to put you in the *trick bag*» (2006b: 43).

Reading as a Coping Strategy that Mutates Intralingually

It is a critical and iconic brand expectation that reading Cormac McCarthy will be challenging. His writing «often requires re-Englishing [a mutative act] by the reader, a Jakobsonian exercise in intralingual translation, so that even the literate native-language reader himself can embark on an understanding of

³ See Doyle (2013: 24).

what McCarthy has written» (Doyle, 2007: 9). In the process, «the reader is pounded relentlessly by a language he thought he knew» (Doyle, 2008: 39) and is forced into a defensive or coping strategy of reading short of, around, or over words too difficult to apprehend during an initial reading. Such visual portaging or abridging results in a mutating effect that neutralizes the difficulties and inefficiencies that would otherwise interrupt the flow of reading, such that what one ends up reading is often not in fact what was originally written but rather a mutated form, now comprehensive because the thick writing has been simplified. The reader changes the original, making the unknown words manageable or irrelevant by skimming over or simply culling them, which of course is not what a meticulously intentional writer like McCarthy, who flaunts any such comfort zones as the informed or at-home reader, would ever want (Doyle, 2008: 61-62). In so doing, the reader becomes an agent of mutation, a mutator of what is being read. In effect, to read *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian* is often to mutate them by scaling back an unknown lexicon to the reader's more limited semantic scopes of comprehension⁴. Of course, «McCarthy unpacked in this manner is no longer McCarthy because it is not so much the story being told as the telling of the story—*how* it is told, *a whole new style seeking expression*— that makes McCarthy McCarthy» (Doyle, 2007: 12). The mutation that reading too often imposes makes for a very different McCarthy.

An example of this reading strategy, which mutates by intralingually translating away semantic difficulties, would be the following from *Outer Dark*: «The sun stood directly over them. It seemed hung there in glaring immobility, as if perhaps arrested with surprise to see above the earth again these odds of morkin once commended there» (1993: 87). The «odds of morkin» phrase stymies the reading. For the vast majority of readers, it would require quite a bit of research to understand that the phrase refers to the remains of decaying human bodies (Doyle, 2007: 15). Taking a lengthy timeout to conduct such research would completely disrupt the mimesis of reading *Outer Dark*; it is more efficient to simply ignore the meaning and read on, disregarding the fact that one is no longer really reading (understanding) what was actually written.

In *Blood Meridian*, for which Shane Schimpf has published an essential intralingual glossary and commentary, *A Reader's Guide to Blood Meridian*, thus augmenting the novel (one of the strategies attributed to *literatura mutante* as critiqued in Spain), other examples would include a «startling abecedarium of lexical unfamiliarity» such as, taken from the letters P, R and S:

pritchel (82: tool employed by blacksmiths for punching or enlarging the nail holes in a horseshoe); **ratchel** (57: gravelly stone); **rick** (324: a large, usually rectangular stack

⁴ Doyle has described it as follows: «we often only intuit and infer the meaning of many, too many, of the words themselves. We feel or float our way contextually through the reading rather than truly understanding each and every word of his exquisitely crafted writing» (Doyle, 2008: 36).

or pile); **sap** (155: in *Blood Meridian* a primitive blackjack made of river rocks covered with leather); **scurf** (214: scaly or shredded dry skin, such as dandruff; the striking image created by McCarthy is that of «a solitary flame frayed by the wind that freshened and faded and shed scattered sparks down the storm like hot scurf blown from some unreckonable forge»); **skelp** (266: a wrought-iron plate from which a gun barrel or pipe is made by bending and welding the edges together, and drawing the thick tube thus formed) (Doyle, 2008: 37).

Indeed, according to Forbis (2006), *Blood Meridian* «contains 10,257 individual unique words», of which «5,308 words occur only once in the book representing nearly 52% of the unique words used to create this masterpiece», corresponding to the 1st category of idio-socio/regiolects (Figure 1). Substituting such intralingual definitions as those above for the sake of comprehension amounts to imposing graphological mutations —*mutante* cross-outs and erasures— upon McCarthy's original text. Indeed, we are reminded of the clever ploy by Borges in his short story *Pierre Menard: Author of the Quixote*, which demonstrates how typographical deviation is not even needed for mutation by intralingual re-reading because of the historico-social effects of time on the meaning of what appears to be, but no longer is, one and the same text, despite no visible change at all in the written word. Readers from different eras, or even from reading to reading, do not interpret a text such as *Don Quixote* the same way, rather it is reshaped according to the zeitgeist of the era in which they live and by their own changes as readers over time.

Geneological Sequencing of Evil and Gender Mutation

Thematically, a genealogy of evil is suggested in Cormac McCarthy from the archetypal brutality and monstrosity of Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* (1992b), to that of Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* (2005), to that of Malkina in *The Counselor* (2013c). The filibuster Judge, «that great hairless thing» (1992b: 123-124), also alluded to as the devil («that sootysouled rascal»)⁵, is a ruthless and inveterate hunter of other men, as is Chigurh in *No Country* more than a century later, also employed in the services of the devil: «if you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up somethin that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics» (2005: 218). Both protagonists wreak havoc in the same «bloodland of the west» (1992b: 138), the geographic setting of what is today's U.S.-Mexico border: «this country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too» (2005: 284). Each is a horrendous travelogue within its respective novel, again an example of a *literatura mutante* tactic of folding a genre within a genre, with

⁵ In other allusions to Judge Holden as the devil, Tobin refers to the Judge as «the greatest fiddler» (1992b: 123) and «The judge. Give the devil his due» (1992b: 125). Gilstrap references the following: «Judge Holden is the devil», claims Tobin, «his Hell this Mexico» and Toadvine concludes that «the preacher's lesson / Is simply Armageddon / The devil he knows how to ride».

Mammon the root cause. The Judge killed for receipts payable (Indian scalps) when both Texas and Chihuahua were complicit in sanctioning the slaughter of native-Americans in the name of nation building. Chigurh —a *sicario* enforcer for a Mexican drug cartel's blood money— can be interpreted as a violent and lawless filibuster from a more recent era, a *mutante* remake of the Judge, who himself is based on the historical antecedent of (see Sepich, 1999: 127), making Chigurh a remake of a remake. As the embodiment of «a true and living prophet of destruction», Chigurh is described by Sheriff Bell in mutant terms as «some new kind» of person that is «coming down the pike» (2005: 3-4). Chigurh himself muses about his criminal difference: «Most people don't believe that there can be such a person. You can see what a problem that must be for them. How to prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of» (2005: 26). Despite his moral mutancy, physically he can easily be sequenced to a generic, nondescript human antecedent, as «He looked like anybody [...] there wasn't nothing unusual looking about him» (2005: 292). Yet the anomaly of his physical appearance, absent in the novel, will emerge later as distinctive hair bangs in the movie mutation by the Coen Brothers (2007a). In the final pages of *No Country*, Sheriff Bell, unable to comprehend, much less prevent, the *sicario's* killing, further confirms the dawning of a new mutant archetype: «we are all of us ill prepared for what is to come and I don't care what shape it takes» (2005: 295).

While Judge Holden and Chigurh are both direct agents in the killing they do, Malkina brokers death from a distance. The travelogue setting remains the same, «[a]long the gritty terrain of the Texas-Mexico border», (book jacket), but the time has moved forward from 1850 in *Blood Meridian* to 1980 in *No Country* to 2013, the date of publication of *The Counselor*. As with *No Country*, the plot builds around the blood money and violence of the Mexican drug cartels. The reader is introduced to Malkina, «a very attractive woman», as generic a description in this written work as it was for Chigurh in *No Country*, as she enjoys a predatory scene «that is always sexual» (2013c: 183) through binoculars: «High desert. A jackrabbit is racing through the grass. The cheetah overtakes it and kills it in a cloud of dust. She almost winces» (2013c: 11-12). Malkina, like Chigurh, is a psychopathic enforcer for a drug cartel. She is «an independent operator» (2013c: 169) funneling money and making payments, hiring sicarios such as the garroteer to do the killing with his horrifying mechanized *bolito*, she herself vanishing from the scene a step ahead of her own implication and death: «You know that when the axe comes through the door I'll already be gone» (2013c: 117). No less ruthless and inveterate, and similarly devoid of conscience and remorse, she also represents a gender mutation from male to female, a sister within the brotherhood. At the very end of *The Counselor*, she too, as Sheriff Bell has done in *No Country*, muses about a mutated future in which «the slaughter to come is probably beyond our imagination» (2013c: 184).

Interlingual Mutation from English to Spanish

Translation as a work of creative interlingual transmutation has a long tradition in the West, dating back at least to the Roman tradition of «transformation in order to mold the foreign into the linguistic structures of one's own culture» (Schulte and Biguenet, 1992: 12), the Cervantine analogy of «translating one tongue into another» as viewing «tapestries from the wrong side» (Robinson, 1997: 149), or Schleiermacher's reminder that speech translated «from one language into another confronts us everywhere in a variety of forms» (in Schulte and Biguenet, 1992: 36). Indeed, Lefevere describes translation as naturalization in the following manner: «To make a foreign work of literature acceptable to the receiving culture, translators will often adapt it to the poetics of that receiving culture» (1992: 8). Willamovitz-Moellendorff says simply that «True translation is metempsychosis» a transmigration of the soul; Schlegel avows that «A language must completely take the place of another»; and Alexander Pope likens translation to «transfusing the Spirit of the Original» (Lefevere, 1992: 34, 54, 64). Molding one thing into another, presenting a different image (seen from another side), giving a different form, adapting, metempsychosis and transmigration, one thing replacing another, and transfusion all are symptoms and synonyms of mutation, suggesting the existence of something else. In a recent consideration, translation as a work of creative interlingual transmutation leans on translation's rebranding and repositioning efforts and effects as «an aesthetic, ecology, and celebration of inexactitude» (Doyle, 2013: 15). This mutative aspect of literary translation is evident in that «the inexactitude of translated literature, in which synonymic texts are always inexact equivalencies and substitutions, is where languages showcase their uniqueness and incompatibilities within translation's sameness/difference paradigm» (Doyle, 2013: 15). The paradigm of sameness/difference exploits the consideration of literary translation as mutation, as the rebranded/repositioned products reveal «new physical characteristics» appropriate to the different genres (novel or screenplay vs. movie), constituting «a permanent [linguistic: added for context] change in the genes» while still maintaining a genetic connection with the original text (adapting the *Cambridge English Dictionary* definition of «mutation»). Translation may also be considered as a mutative grafting or implanting of living tissue from one polysystem, in this case that of contemporary American literature, into another polysystem, that of contemporary literature written or published in Spanish. When Cormac McCarthy is re-written *in* Spanish as a remake of the original American English, he is written *into* Spanish; while not technically a Spanish writer, he becomes an author who as of translation belongs to literature in Spanish. In this regard, the technicality is reduced to a minor one.

Translation as transmutation or metamorphosis from McCarthy's American English into Peninsular Spanish is a visual and phonetic fact in Luis Murillo Fort's translations. To illustrate, when *Outer Dark* (1993) is transformed into *La oscuridad exterior* (2002), the Appalachian-folksy substandard «When ye get done and get abed» (1993: 62) mutates interlingually into a more standard Peninsular dialect

as «Cuando hayas terminado y estés acostada» (2002: 56-57); *Blood Meridian* (1992b) becomes *Meridiano de sangre* (2001), and with it «Aint that the drizzlin shits» (1992b: 90) is transformed into the slangy-sounding but bowdlerized «Qué gansada» (2001: 113); and *The Sunset Limited* (2006b) is barely changed into *El Sunset Limited* (2013b), with «You think I'm fixin to put you in the trick bag» (2006b: 43) becoming the satisfying compensation «Se imagina que intento ponerle chinitas en el zapato» (2013b: 31) [You're imagining that I'm trying to put pebbles in your shoes (i.e., to make you feel uncomfortable)].

Interlingual back-translation exercises can be useful in further revealing what has become of a passage in translation, serving as measures of the extent to which a translation has mutated away, or differentiated itself, from the source language text, first considered heuristically in its standard dialect, then in its McCathized idio-socio-regiolect. The following demonstrates the visual, stylistic, tonal and denotative mutation at work, each version related yet distinct, orbiting both centripetally and centrifugally in relation to the source text:

Standard: «Gentlemen, said Toadvine, I'll bet I know what's going on» →
Idio-socio-regiolect: «Gentlemens, said Toadvine, I'll guarangoddamntee ye I know what that there is about» (1992b: 79) →
Interlingual translation: «Señores, dijo Toadvine, me juego algo a que sé lo que se está cociendo» (2001: 101) →
Back-translation: «Gentlemen, said Toadvine, I'll bet I know what's cooking».

Intersemiotic Mutation from Novel to Film

To adapt McCarthy's fiction into film is an inter-semiotic transmission of the McCarthy «germ» and brand across modes, mediums, and audiences, just as to translate his novels is to transmit the McCarthy germ from American English into Luis Murillo Fort's Peninsular Castilian from Barcelona, and from one large language group of readers to another. The intersemiotic mutation of the novel *No Country for Old Men*, whose chapter sequencing is constructed like a back-and-forth montage of movie scenes, and the movie script *The Counselor* (2013c) into their respective filmic adaptations by the iconic Coen Brothers and Ridley Scott provide yet another aspect of the mutative complex. Chigurh and Malkina, utterly nondescript in the written texts in which they appear, mutate into the characters played by the very recognizable Javier Bardem, with his distinctive hair bangs combed across his forehead⁶, and the sensually-sexually supercharged Cameron Diaz. The descriptive passages in McCarthy's texts mutate into photographic

⁶ About Chigurh's hair bangs in the movie, Murillo Fort says in an interview about his translation of the novel that «yo juraría que en ningún momento hay una descripción del asesino Chigurh con el peinado que luce Bardem en la película. Entonces es una licencia poética de los Coen, cosa que me parece bien» [«I would swear that there is no description anywhere in the novel of the murderer Chigurh having Bardem's hair style. It's a poetic license by the Coens, which is perfectly fine»] (Doyle, 2010: 184).

scenes. The textual monologue, for example, in *No Country*, mutates into a different number and order of words⁷ and, indeed, into a different premise for the plot⁸. The absence of real sound for the reader mutates into the voices, accents, and dialects of the characters who now speak out loud for the moviegoer. Sheriff Bell, for example, can finally be heard via the voice and accent nuances—«plain, flat, weary, husky, older, raspy, gritty, the soft hint of a sing-song to it»— of actor Tommy Lee Jones (Doyle, 2018: 26). And in the subtitling and re-voiced (dubbing) versions, the American English (2007a) in the two movies mutates into five different Spanish renditions (2007b, 2007c): that of DVD region code #1 (subtitling using the Spanish of the United States), DVD region code #2 (subtitling and dubbing using the Spanish from Spain), and DVD region code #4 (subtitling and dubbing using the Spanish from South America, Central America, and Mexico) (Doyle, 2018: 26). The mutative syndrome, having first shown itself interlingually in the movement from English to Spanish, now manifests itself intralingually via regional dialects of Spanish, as when «I was sheriff» variously becomes «Fui el alguacil» in DVD region code #1, «Era sheriff» in DVD region code #2, «Me hice comisario» in DVD region code #4, and so on. Once can experience *No Country* in six distinct Spanish language versions, from that of the novel to those of the subtitlings and dubbings. The movement from novel to film is accompanied by a mutation in reception aesthetics from reader to viewer, who can also read the movie subtitles at the same time, folding the act of reading into that of movie watching.

Conclusion: A Theoretical Heuristic

The conference presentation and the published article that it anticipated are themselves mutations of prior critical work by the author, from «A whole new style...» to «Five Translators Translating...», «Enter the Monster...», «A Translation Biopsy...», «A Translation Autopsy...» and the forthcoming «Translation as Glocalized Repositioning and Rebranding...», which in turn reference and mutate from other critical works on Cormac McCarthy, such as those contained in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Arnold and Luce, 1999), *Sacred Violence* (Hall and Wallach, 2002), *No Country for Old Men: from Novel to Film* (King, Wallach, and Welsh, 2009), etc. Considered heuristically as a Benjaminian unleashing of meaning potential, the mutations triggered by Cormac McCarthy are part and parcel of literary creation, aesthetic reception (reading and movie-going), translation, adaptation, subtitling and dubbing, and criticism. In the example of

⁷ For example, «[t]he opening monologue in the movie has 287 words, 246 fewer than the novel, an abridgement cobbled together from three wording chunks selected from the novel in the following order: pages 90 (50 words), 63 (71 words), and 3-4 (166 words)» (Doyle, 2018: 27).

⁸ «The most startling reversal of meaning in the repositioning/rebranding from novel to movie is that from the outset the movie flips the moral premise and tone of the novel [...] The complete reversal of meaning is from “won’t” and “never would” to “will” and “be part of”» (Doyle, 2018: 27).

Figure 1 below, a preliminary mapping of at least five major categories of mutation issues from Cormac McCarthy, and within them at least 35 identified mutative instances. In the final example under the category Intermodal Academic Mutation, mutation from conference presentation to scholarly article is represented by the change in titles from «*Mutation as Metaphoric for Literary Translation and Filmic Adaptation: from Cormac McCarthy to Luis Murillo Fort, the Coen Brothers and Ridley Scott*» to «*Mutation as Metaphoric for Reading, Literary Translation, and Filmic Adaptation: Considerations Issuing from Cormac McCarthy*». Taken together, the provisional tracking of these mutative instances provides a theoretical heuristic for a trope that contributes to our understanding of what reading, translation, adaptation, and scholarly criticism *do* to a literary text, and *how* «Mutation» helps to better understand the thickness and granularity of a literary brand.

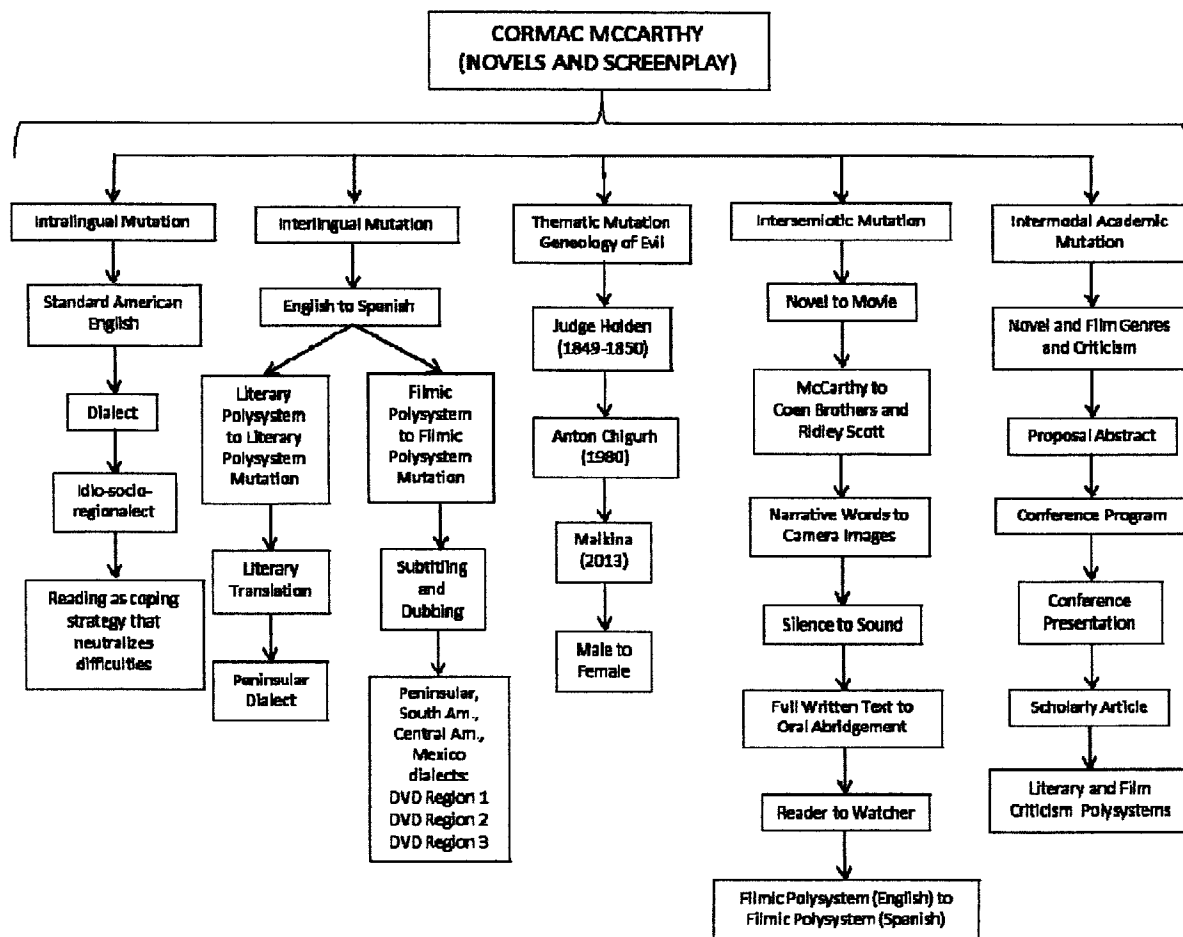


Figure 1. Preliminary and Provisional Map of Mutations Issuing from Cormac McCarthy.

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