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Brief Review: Drugs, Diamonds and the Digital Age: Global Capitalism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Counselor*

Lydia R Cooper*

Creighton University, Omaha, NE, USA

*Corresponding author: Lydia R Cooper, Associate Professor, Department of English, Creighton University, Omaha, NE, USA, E-mail: lydiacooper@creighton.edu

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Introduction

Recently, we have seen a new strain of television shows and film Westerns that focus attention on the War on Drugs rather than on the cattle rustling, train robbing, or water rights conflicts of earlier times. Think, for example, of the Coen brothers' Academy Award-winning *No Country for Old Men* (2007), Ridley Scott's *The Counselor*, FX's *Justified* and the award-winning AMC television show *Breaking Bad*, all of which dramatize the manufacture and transportation of illegal drugs. More importantly, these Western-style narratives dramatize the economic implications of the War on Drugs—a war whose racial and socioeconomic power dynamics victimize the victims of drug use.

In an article published in *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Eric Blumenson and Eva Nilson explain the categorical failure of the War on Drugs, a level of failure that makes its continued entrenchment in U.S. law enforcement and judicial policy surprising, at least on the surface. That apparent contradiction, they contend, derives from the economic stimulus given to law enforcement agencies by the War on Drugs. Forfeiture provisions authorizing law enforcement agencies to seize drug-related assets have encouraged the many budget-restricted agencies around the country to “use the proceeds for their budgetary needs” [1]. In addition to the economic incentive for law enforcement agencies to focus unilaterally on drug-related arrests and seizures, the application of the law in drug-related crimes is marked with systemic racial bias. James Fellner argues that the case of the War on Drugs exemplifies the “impact of structural racism” [2] and of course Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* has brought this data and this argument before a wide public audience [3].

The fictional representations of this political and penal crisis mentioned earlier situate the War on Drugs within the context of that most quintessentially American of genres: the Western. In so doing, they explain the War on Drugs within the context of the political and economic climate driving policy today. For example, the AMC television series *Breaking Bad*, which boasted 10.3 million viewers for the show's finale, a stunning performance that ranked it third of all US cable show finales, is a story about a “modern day” New Mexican chemistry teacher who “breaks bad” and becomes a methamphetamine cooker and drug kingpin upon receiving a cancer diagnosis. White's

vicious turn against society, then, speaks cathartically to the helpless rage of many US citizens in 2008 that experienced crippling economic downturns following the financial crisis, coupled with a deficient health care system. The other two films mentioned—*No Country for Old Men* and *the Counsellor*—were written by Cormac McCarthy, whose work has increasingly turned to narratives that examine the consequences of global economic disaster on ordinary people.

In my article, “Drugs, Diamonds, and the Digital Age: Global Capitalism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Counselor*,” I argue that the critically-panned film *The Counselor* poses an important and timely critique of the economic motivation driving the War on Drugs in the United States. A visually flashy crime drama, *The Counselor* follows an unnamed cartel lawyer (“the Counselor”) as he enters into an agreement with a cartel-affiliated nightclub owner, Reiner, and Reiner's dangerous, former call girl partner, Malkina. Reiner and the Counselor plot a drug deal in which they will transport cocaine across the Mexico-U.S. border in a sewage truck and sell the product up in Chicago. At one point, the Counselor explains to the economic system perpetuating the War on Drugs; he says, “If the drug wars stop this will dry up, right?” [4]. In other words, U.S. policing and penal systems are driven by the financial incentive to arrest and imprison bodies. And so long as the policing and penal systems profit off the illegality of the product, the illegality of the product drives up the profitability of trafficking in that product's sale.

My article examines the film's critique of the War on Drugs in the context of global capitalism and the U.S.'s perpetuation of fiscal policies that exacerbate a global underclass. McCarthy's economic views have been critically understudied, and *The Counselor* offers key insight into his critique of capitalism, and his critique of the failure to imagine any alternatives to capitalism, or to neoliberal justifications for value systems imposed by a free market, in Western nations. In a scene near the beginning of *The Counselor*, the lawyer visits a diamond merchant in Amsterdam in order to purchase an engagement ring stone for his fiancée, Laura. The diamond merchant embarks on a philosophical treatise about the nature of merit, economic value, determinism, and moral virtue. Perhaps because of his interest in the economics of virtue, or perhaps simply because he deals in diamonds, the counselor remarks that his interlocutor must be a Sephardic Jew. This scene, like the subsequent B-movie violence and voyeuristic sexuality of

what Jacob Agner calls McCarthy's "trashy spectacle" of a film, conjures the troubling recent rise in anti-Semitism in the U.S. and around the world [5]. That anti-Semitism, of course, has emerged alongside global shifts towards isolationism, nationalism, and anti-capitalism.

Through its evocation of distasteful Jewish stereotypes and gratuitous violence and sexual predation, McCarthy's "trashy" film exposes the monstrosities of late global capitalism. Specifically, the Sephardic Jewish diamond merchant, the Tarantino-esque violence of the cartel, and the seductive, predatory Malkina all invoke the looming crisis of global capitalism. That is, McCarthy's gore-drenched film brings to vivid life a monstrous and exploitative market system that reproduces itself through victimizing vulnerable populations.

This article suggests that the film—and other such visual representations of the War on Drugs—resonate with recent moves from the U.S. Department of Justice to resume the War on Drugs. At the very least, it provides a visually stunning

metaphor for a crime whose very criminality is entrenched in our justice system.

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