

# Black Magic Realism

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*Moral Dilemma, Ironic Detachment, & New Levels of Depravity in The Counselor*

“Entertainment is instruction and instruction is ideology.”

—Herbert I. Schiller, *The Mind Managers*

It’s hard to believe, but I almost didn’t watch *The Counselor*, the 2013 movie directed by Ridley Scott from a script by Cormac McCarthy. The reviews I’d seen were so scathing that they created a gaudy, repellent aura around the film, and I imagined a piece of self-indulgent, decadent filmmaking. Watching it, I kept waiting for it to fall apart and dissolve into pointless violence or disjointed surrealist hijinks, but scene after scene, what I saw was some of the most fiercely original writing ever put on the movie screen, and the most improbably subversive, freakily inspired movie to come out of Hollywood since *Fight Club*. So what was with all the negative reactions?

In a way, the critical reception of the film actually confirms its meaning, and I would guess that the people who say *The Counselor* is a bad movie, who call it incoherent, self-important, or pretentious, are unconsciously looking for ways to dismiss its bleakly seductive, existentially devastating vision. The world most critics and audience members are living in is a very different world to the world portrayed by *The Counselor*. *The Counselor* is heavily stylized, and there’s a shallowness to it that seems incompatible with what we usually think of as art; but it’s also grimly real, and it doesn’t offer the sort of ironic detachment that audiences are used to getting from violent, nihilistic movies, post-Tarantino. I think that McCarthy’s raw-boned stew is more than most moviegoers have the stomach for.

*The Counselor* isn’t a particularly compassionate or sensitive work (neither was *Fight Club*); but it’s an uncompromising one. Considering its subject matter and the present political climate, that’s something of a miracle in itself. Judging the film not only on its own merit but also by its critical reception, I think the filmmakers were unusually willing to let the subject matter dictate the form, even if that meant sacrificing their chances of having a big commercial (or even critical) success. *The Counselor* has a unified, unifying vision (McCarthy’s, not Scott’s), and because of that I think it’s a work of integrity and courage—by Hollywood standards at least. If it had been more warmly received I’d be more suspicious of it, frankly, but anything this damn good that displeases this many people must be pushing the right buttons. Nothing else can account for some of the vicious reactions it received.

For me, the movie was like a soft, slow bullet that exploded inside me and spread all the way through my system, changing it. It worked its way into my consciousness like a virus and slowly took it over, expanding and bringing areas of darkness to light. That’s not an entirely pleasant

process, and *The Counselor* isn't a pleasant movie. I think it will take a few years, or even decades, before it's recognized for what it is—an unpleasantly accurate depiction of our time.

That's if there's anyone left to recognize it.

## American Heart of Darkness

"When gods were more human, men were more divine."

—Cormac McCarthy, *The Counselor* script

*The Counselor* begins with a long, uncomfortably intimate sex scene between Michael Fassbender (as the counselor, we never find out his name) and his lover, Laura, played by Penelope Cruz. Like much of the film, the scene is light on action and heavy on dialogue. The touchingly awkward realism shows not only two people "in love" (i.e., relative strangers) but also their naiveté and self-immersion. They are first seen underneath white bed sheets, as if hiding from the world like children. After the counselor manages to get Laura to talk dirty for him (she uses the f-word), he says to her, "You've reached a whole new level of depravity." Hearing this, I was afraid the naiveté of the characters was also the naiveté of the filmmakers. I needn't have worried.

The film is stylized, and Ridley Scott's direction is slick. The trailer for the film made it look like one more ultra-violent, nihilistic "jaunt" of the kind Hollywood does so frequently and so poorly, the sort of film I don't care if I never see again yet which inexplicably gets good reviews (most recently *Seven Psychopaths*, which I steered clear of, having suffered through the inanities of *In Bruges* already). But the film is an odd mixture of overwrought with understated. The dialogue lays it on thick, and the film is largely driven by dialogue (and it's a powerful engine, McCarthy isn't just flirting with darkness, he's going all the way *in* there). Because of that, the action—even when it's shocking, such as the two beheadings—comes as visual punctuation to the dialogue. Scott's tone is no more garish or pumped up for these scenes than for the slower, more contemplative ones. His touch isn't subtle exactly, but it's unobtrusive, and it's a blessing because the material could have easily gone over the top, into unintentional parody. The film *is* funny, but not at its own expense, and that's a blessing too, because without the humor, its darkness would be oppressive, suffocating. Ridley Scott (who was 76 last year) gets the tone just right, and I think it's his best film in years, maybe decades, making it doubly frustrating it was so poorly received.

Ridley Scott's last good movie was *Gladiator*, and here he seems to be consciously playing on the idea of the US as a not-quite fallen empire, rife (and ripe) with corruption and decadence, while the barbarian hordes pour across the borders, to plunder and pillage. There's a clearly, and accurately, implied link between the corporate corruption of banks, lawyers, traders and politicians on the one side, with the drug cartels, hit squads, abduction, torture and murder of

Mexican women on the other. The line between the two worlds is imaginary, just as the US-Mexican border is imaginary. It's one land and the blood flows freely across all borders. More subtly, the movie seems to implicate the world of Hollywood A-list directors and movie stars with corporate corruption (and the other, darker world), and tacitly to acknowledge that *The Counselor* is a product of the same system it's indicting. It shows how slippery the slope is between unethical business dealings and full-blown moral desolation, and how quickly and irrevocably the one leads to the other.

As a vision of evil *The Counselor* is completely persuasive. Its depiction of soullessness as eerily sumptuous, even sickly erotic, of moral incoherence as the driving force behind civilization, makes it almost Lovecraftian. With its relentless, seductive insistence on horror as the soul of the plot, it may be the first really postmodern horror film. By going all the way into the nihilistic perspective of a godless universe, it achieves what Coppola failed so spectacularly to do with *Apocalypse Now*, and takes us all the way into the American heart of darkness.

And—surprise, surprise—it's in Mexico.

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One thing that struck me about all the reviews of *The Counselor*, negative and (occasionally) positive, is that none of them referred to the real-world events which the film uses for its storyline. For example, in "The Disappeared and Mexico's New Dirty War," (November 21, 2013) [<http://nacla.org/blog/2013/11/21/disappeared-and-mexicos-new-dirty-war>], Peter Watt writes how it's "becoming increasingly difficult for Mexican officials to pretend that the massive number of murders and enforced disappearances is not part of a deliberate government strategy." Attributing the disappearances to drug cartels, and the idea that the Mexican and the U.S. government are waging a war on organized crime, Watts insists, is "a pervasive but totally false myth."

To give some perspective, the number of people forcibly disappeared in Mexico is probably now more than during the notorious Argentine military dictatorship, which developed a deliberate strategy of annihilating an entire layer of the population. The dirty war in Argentina, under the rubric of Operation Condor, targeted anyone the authorities deemed subversive. . . . Over 26,000 people were classified "disappeared" [in Mexico] during the six-year term of former President Felipe Calderón, who left Mexican politics for a lucrative Fellowship at The Harvard Kennedy School of Government last year [2012]. . . . Over 98 percent of homicides committed are neither investigated nor solved. Indeed, in 2012, of the 27,700 murders in Mexico, only 523 were solved and led to prosecution. [B]oth the U.S. and Mexican governments continue to fund what is becoming one of the most vicious and violent assaults on civil society in the world. . . . The dead and disappeared are merely collateral fodder for capitalism's insatiable demand for profit and expansion of markets and control. Those who get in the way, like political opponents in Argentina and Chile, or the impoverished majority in Mexico, are

externalities to the natural functioning of a “free” market increasingly defended by force and coercion.

This is not something most people—at least most *Americans*—think about. The drug wars in Mexico are pretty much common knowledge to Americans, but they’re probably mostly seen as evidence of how backward, brutal, and barbaric life is in Mexico, not of the consequences of US interference. And yet the motivation for the United States’ (and the European Union’s) presence in Latin America is really no different than that of the Spanish, Portuguese, British, French and Dutch colonialists before them: the plundering of natural resources and cheap labor. According to another online article [[http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Plan Condor](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Plan_Condor)], this is “compounded these days by neo-colonial extraction of forcibly contrived ‘debt.’”

The methods are privatization, dismantling of domestic agricultural economies, and open markets imposed by the IMF and World Bank through local clients to favor multinational corporations like BP-Amoco, Monsanto, Cargill and other all too familiar names. . . . As Argentine journalist Stella Calloni observed, this counterinsurgency campaign went far beyond combating guerrillas. It was a “holy war against the left, which . . . included anyone challenging the status quo, armed or not. Thus, nuns, professors, students, workers, artists and performers, journalists, even democratic opposition politicians” came to be viewed as threats to the body politic. . . . Washington’s plan is to “economically and militarily wipe out the social and indigenous movements in order to obtain their resources and territories, says Bolivian Congressman Evo Morales, echoing a view popular in the region. The undercurrent of these plans is the same program as has been going on for the last 500 years—the eradication of our indigenous cultures,” he told IPS.

One of the things *The Counselor* shows, implicitly, simply by daring to deal with this subject matter, is that the Mexican drug cartels—the barbarian hordes depicted in the film—aren’t a threat to the stability of the US but *part of the machinery of capitalism that sustains it*. For example, in *To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from Inside the Drug War*, John Gibler writes:

In 2008, drug money saved the major global banks from collapse and thus, stretching just a bit, saved capitalism from a devastating internal crisis when the speculative capital markets imploded. Drug money—truckloads of cash, actual physical money—would appear to be one of capitalism’s global savings accounts.

Adding some substance to this bold—though not really surprising—claim, in “How Drug Profits saved Capitalism” (which I couldn’t find online, only quotes from it here

[<http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/06/01/wall-street-s-role-in-narco-trafficking/>]), James Petras writes:

While the Pentagon arms the Mexican government and the US Drug Enforcement Agency enforces the “military solution,” the biggest US banks receive, launder and transfer hundreds of billions of dollars to the drug lords’ accounts, who then buy modern arms, pay private armies of assassins and corrupt untold numbers of political and law enforcement officials on both sides of the border. Drug profits, in the most basic

sense, are secured through the ability of the cartels to launder and transfer billions of dollars through the US banking system. The scale and scope of the US banking-drug cartel alliance surpasses any other economic activity of the US private banking system. According to US Justice Department records, one bank alone laundered \$378.3 billion dollars between May 1, 2004 and May 31, 2007 (*The Guardian*, May 11, 2011). *Every major bank in the US has served as an active financial partner of the murderous drug cartels.* [emphasis added]

Probably critics ignored this material for a number of reasons. Firstly, *The Counselor* isn't the kind of socially conscious movie that obliges audiences to think deeply about its subject matter. It's not *Schindler's List*, *Gandhi*, or *Philadelphia*, and it almost dares us to take it seriously at that level. Secondly, more importantly, these aren't social issues that most critics, especially not American critics, are willing to look at, and even if they were, the publications they write for probably wouldn't allow them to.

While I was working on this piece, I went to the movies to see *American Hustle*. Before the film started, there were three previews. The first one was for *Heaven Is For Real*, the next for the new Jack Ryan movie, *Shadow Recruit*, and the last for *Lone Survivor*, a supposed true story about "an elite unit of Navy SEALs who encounter an army of Taliban forces in the Afghanistan mountains during a raid in 2005." The first movie is obviously a blatant work of Christian propaganda about how good people (including a soldier) go to Heaven; the second is yet one more glamorization of CIA skullduggery; the third speaks for itself. What struck me about the trailers was just how brazen the propaganda aspect of Hollywood moviemaking has become. There wasn't even a token attempt to disguise it. As Herbert Schiller writes in *The Mind Managers*: "Entertainment is instruction and instruction is ideology."

*The Counselor* is a message movie of a particular sort, an *anti*-message movie. Potentially, it works as an enema to flush out all of those Hollywood poisons until there's no movie junk left. The message of *The Counselor* is the message that all these other movies are working overtime to drown out of our awareness. It's the inescapable truth which empire upon empire (including the Hollywood empire) has been created to keep out, like barbarian hordes threatening to tear down everything we hold "sacred" and "good"—giving the lie to Hollywood's golden promise of heaven for all good Christian soldiers, and eternal damnation for everyone else.

So what's the message? The world of diamonds and Armani excess which the counselor belongs to, and which he makes his deal to maintain—the world of America imperialism—depends not only on sneaky trading, money laundering, and drug manufacture but upon acts so horrendous that most people refuse to even believe they are happening. To one degree or another, we are all complicit with that horror. The counselor's realization that he has sacrificed the one thing of true value in exchange for hard, cold, shiny trinkets is the realization that's waiting for all of us, in lieu of "Heaven."

## Diamonds Are Forever

“The beheadings, the mutilations—that’s just business. You’ve got to keep up appearances. It’s not like there’s some smoldering rage at the bottom of it.”

—Westray, *The Counselor*

The counselor believes he can have dealings with the “crime world” in order to get what he wants from it and bring it back into *his* world. His choice to become *of* that second world—to succumb to its temptations—is so catastrophic for him because it happens before he has entered all the way *into* it, so he has no idea of what he is agreeing to become part of. Awakening to reality for the counselor means awakening into a nightmare, the nightmare of his own complicity.

The counselor’s sins are legion, but the folly of buying the diamond is first among them. In the post-credits scene, he travels to Amsterdam on a supposed business trip but really to buy a massively expensive diamond for Laura, before proposing to her. We later find out that he is already in debt, and that it’s partly to cover the costs of this diamond that he gets involved with the shady deal that kick starts the plot, and that will eventually take from him everything he cares about.

In his exchange with the Sephardic diamond dealer (Bruno Gantz) the counselor receives his first piece of advice. He’s told that the diamond trade is “a cynical business—we seek only imperfections” (a perfect diamond would be pure light). If I read McCarthy’s strange, pulp-archetypal narrative right, diamonds are used as stand-ins for souls, which puts the sage old (Jewish) diamond dealer in the role of Satan, who of course looks not for merit but for imperfection, to tempt us and snag our souls. *The Counselor* works on at least two levels: that of an action fantasy crime drama; and at the level of a religious, mythic narrative about temptation and damnation, in which the US stands in for the Roman Empire, Sodom, or Babalon, the diamond trader for Satan/God/the Demiurge, Malkina for the Scarlet Woman, Rosie Perez’s jailed witch-whore-mother—referred to in the script as “the mother of all mothers”—for the Virgin Mary, and so on. The meanings are clear-cut but pleasantly loose-fitting, and identifying who’s who in McCarthy’s mythological mash-up isn’t necessary for a visceral experience of the material. (Though it may be that some people unconsciously avoided having a visceral experience by trying to figure it all out.)

The diamond dealer gives a long, difficult to decipher speech about how every country that has driven out the Jews has “suffered the same fate.” He makes the bold claim that there is no culture (since the Greeks) besides the Semitic culture, and that the heart of a culture is found in the nature of its hero. Western culture, while driving out the Jews, has adopted the Man of God, Christ, “the prophet-penitent,” as its hero, even though the God in question is that of Jewish culture. “How do you steal a God?” he ponders. The counselor offers no answer. The dealer winds up his speech by saying that “The Jew beholds his tormentor in the vestments of his own ancient culture.”

The insinuation of this speech, as far as I could tell, is similar to something the poet William Blake wrote, that when a nation rejects the Jews but adopts the Jewish faith, it becomes subject to “Jewish rule.” Christians worship the same God as the Jews, and yet the Jewish God is temperamentally opposed to the Christian virtue of mercy and forgiveness. Jehovah is a wrathful, avenging deity who smites anyone who displeases Him (and even some who don’t, as Job can testify). The Jews appeased Jehovah by offering up blood sacrifices, and the film’s heart of darkness (Mexico, the barbaric land outside the walls of the Empire) is a killing field where young women are tortured and murdered for the entertainment of cosmically depraved overlords—as blood sacrifices to appease monstrous appetites.

In contrast, the innocent victim in the film, Laura, is a well-healed, half-hearted Catholic who goes to confession but admits that her sins are part of a lifestyle which she has no intention of changing. Such hollow offerings can’t satisfy the God of the Jews; they can only provoke contempt, and wrathful retribution. Only blood and bone can satisfy. I think there’s an implication in the film that, because of the way the counselor sees Laura, he ends up unconsciously offering her up as a sacrifice to the God he unconsciously serves. In the early scenes, the counselor objectifies Laura in the process of idealizing her; he makes her his “religion,” an idol to worship. “You are a glory,” he tells her, after she accepts his proposal, and later he says that being in bed with her is living, everything else is just waiting. He buys the diamond in order to secure her, his pride and glory, and it’s that desire to possess the ultimate object of his desire that drives him deeper into debt, and into the deal which Laura will eventually become a sacrifice to.

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As played by Michael Fassbender, the counselor is slick, smug, shallow, but basically a sympathetic character. Without the emotional intensity—the suffering—which Fassbender brings to the role, the movie would be weightless and its horror nothing but titillation. The counselor is a player, but no more than most of us would secretly (or not so secretly) like to be. He thinks he’s in love but really he is after his “glory.” He thinks he can fraternize with criminals and killers and reap the benefits without being one of them himself. He’s both cynical and naïve—his cynicism *is* his naiveté, and vice versa. He has no idea of the forces at play, both within and without, in his psyche and in the world. The irony of the title is that the counselor never counsels anyone but is constantly asking for and receiving advice from others, and then ignoring it. In fact the counselor receives three warnings before he takes the step that will bring about his ruin. The diamond dealer shows him “a cautionary stone” and talks about how the brevity of our lives in no way diminishes us—in retrospect a reference to Laura’s death. Reiner (Javier Bardem) also warns the counselor (“You won’t see it coming at all”), and then Westray (Brad Pitt) cautions him and describes “Scot’s law”: “an instrument in which one person stands in as surety for another.” The counselor replies, “It sounds a bit primitive.” He has no idea.

The counselor is the negotiator between worlds who winds up crossing a line which he didn’t know was there, becoming hostage to the deal he only *thought* he was making. In fact, he *was*

the deal, his “soul” is the desired merchandise that’s “purloined” and purchased—by means of Laura, who is the “surety,” a word which refers to property which a creditor can claim, in case the client defaults on their obligation. The implication is that Laura is treated as the counselor’s property, because that is how he treats her, as a precious object to be secured. When the counselor finds out from Westray that the deal has gone terribly wrong and that he is a marked man, even when Westray warns him, “It’s not that you’re going down, it’s what you are taking with you,” the counselor’s attempts to protect Laura may seem almost unbelievably careless (when he calls her, he tells her to go home!). Yet because the counselor is the only character who recognizes the depth of his folly, and who becomes fully cognizant of his “damnation,” he’s also the only one in the film with even a thimbleful’s chance of being redeemed.

Javier Bardem’s Reiner, on the other hand, is so empty he makes the counsellor seem soulful. Reiner is a playboy who is in over his head, knows it, and doesn’t care. He’s afraid of what his choices are leading to but he seems to lack even the necessary character to struggle with his choices. It’s almost a surprise when he tries to escape his killers because he’s done nothing to prepare for the moment, even though he knew it was coming. Bardem is both touching and amusing in the role but he’s not particularly substantial. He has nothing like the presence of his angel of death in *No Country for Old Men*. Reiner is like a candyman living in a world of cocaine and confetti: his death has no sting because his life seems like just endless diddling. He describes being in love with Malkina (Cameron Diaz) as like being in love with “an easeful death.”

Bardem’s best scene is when he describes Malkina fucking a car: his bemusement—which seems about to give way to despair at any moment, but never quite does—is the most real thing about him. Reiner recognizes his shallowness and admits his incapacity to understand, or even appreciate, the tentacles of debauchery that are slowly wrapping themselves around him. He’s just a tidbit for the leopard queen, to be swallowed whole without mastication. When the Mexicans kill Reiner, they’re angry with him for fighting back because their orders were to take him alive. In the end, he wasn’t even substantial enough to provide fodder for a snuff film.

Penelope Cruz’s Laura is probably the least well-drawn character, but then I’ve never had much of a response to Cruz. She’s cast here for her blend of sensuality and innocence; she’s the “good girl,” and the closest this world has to an innocent to be sacrificed. (The predictability of the outcome doesn’t in any way lessen its impact.) The movie—including McCarthy’s writing—isn’t multi-layered or nuanced enough to make us *care* for the characters until we see how terribly they suffer. But this is part of the movie’s *milieu* too: these people don’t become real to *themselves* until they suffer. I should say *unless* they do, because most of them seem incapable of real suffering (you have to be alive to suffer), at least until they get their head caught in a steel wire noose.

Predictably, Brad Pitt gives the film a major infusion of wit and charisma as Westray, the counsellor’s mysterious business associate who warns him about drug deals gone bad, and who later gives him the inside scoop on snuff films. Like most of the characters in the film, it’s hard to

determine Westray's exact level of involvement in any of what happens. He's like a seedier, more jaded(!), Armani-clad version of Cogan in *Killing Them Softly*. It's too bad—though also darkly fitting—that Westray turns out to be a sham, and that his words of wisdom (he has some of the best lines in the film) to the counsellor eventually ring hollow. Westray proves incapable of walking his talk. When he says he is ready to disappear at a moment's notice (and join a monastery), that he's seen it all and it's all shit, we believe him because, as Pitt plays it, we can see that Westray believes it. Pitt is such a consummate presence as an actor that it never occurs to us (it didn't to me anyway) that it's all empty bravado. Reiner's wisdom that "Anyone who thinks he's the smartest is on his way to the slam" doesn't quite prove true of Westray, but close enough: he's the victim of his over-confidence, and his death is the film's full-blown *grand guignol* set-piece. It's almost required after the steadily building dread of *implied* violence of the dialogue.

One of the unusual things about *The Counselor* is that it opts to tell rather than show the most shocking elements of its narrative and yet is all the more disturbing for it. When Westray warns the counselor not to imagine there's anything these people aren't capable of, it's the emphasis on this fact (which echoes John Huston's famous speech from *Chinatown*), rather than any visible examples of it, that's the real horror. The way Pitt plays these scenes confirms what many of us probably suspect deep down, and which the film plays up: we *want* to believe the worst about human depravity, and the idea of people acting without any moral compass or checks or bounds is weirdly attractive to us *because* it's so horrifying. But also the reverse: it's so horrifying because it's attractive. In a world where everything is permitted, the only possible defense is to tell ourselves that none of it is true, that *nothing* is. That's ironic detachment. The characters all have it, but few of them survive it.

As for Malkina, the arch-predator, Cameron Diaz may not be quite the actor to pull off such a tricky performance, but she does a good job with what she's got. For a line like "Truth has no temperature" she seems just about right. Her beauty isn't so much scary as creepily vacuous, unnerving. Malkina isn't the usual *femme fatale* driven by lust and greed; that would make her recognizably human. We are given a clue that she's the victim of childhood trauma, probably at the hands of US imperialism. (She mentions that her parents were thrown out of a helicopter when she was three.) But there's no indication of a soul in torment. She's a predator with leopard spot tattoos down her back who taunts priests in confession booths and has no more compunction about sending her lover to the slaughter than most of us would about squeezing an orange. She's Kali, the devouring female, and in her last scene—which is slightly overwritten—she may be too shallow, too weightless and bloodless to give it the apocalyptic jolt it seems to require. Then again, this may be just what the filmmakers were after: the bimbo-banality of evil.

As for Malkina having sex with a car, a scene singled out by some critics as the apotheosis of the film's self-indulgent incoherence and gratuitous nastiness. The way I read it is that Malkina is a sexual predator who doesn't care about sex, because she doesn't have any interest in human

beings outside of what she can *mine* them for. She only cares about objects (the soul being the ultimate “object”). And since she’s objectified *herself*, it makes perfect sense she would want to have sex with an object. She may also be showing Reiner exactly how and why he will never have her, that he could never hope to satisfy such inhuman desire (except perhaps by dying), or even understand it. He’s just an aperitif.

In the final scene, *Malkina*, having gained the spoils of the slaughter (Jehovah’s day of wrath) which her *machinations* have brought down upon all the other characters in the film, mentions the convenience of transporting a fortune by converting it into diamonds, small enough “to be held in the palm of your hand.” This brings the action full circle (perhaps Malkina will be traveling to Amsterdam to make her purchase?). It also places the Jews (who have taken an active and even dominant role in the diamond sector for hundreds of years) at the level *above* Malkina in the predators’ hierarchy. Jehovah, Yaldaboath, Satan, the Demiurge of the Jews, as “the prince of this world,” is part of McCarthy’s metaphysical, socio-mythic narrative, and of course, mythologically speaking at least, he got it right, it is “one God to rule them all.” (This may be why the scene is largely unintelligible, to avoid charges of anti-Semitism. It’s bad enough to speak ill of the Jews, but it’s entirely unacceptable to get it *right*.)

The name may provide some clues to her. Malkina is close to *maquina*, Spanish for machine. It may also be linked to *Melchizedek*, a king and priest mentioned in *Genesis*. The Jewish spelling of the name is *Malki Tzedek*, and *malki* is said to mean “king.” On the other hand, the words “malki zedek” has also been interpreted as *mouthful of offering*. The last words of the film, spoken by Malkina after she warns her banker that “the slaughter to come is probably beyond our imagining,” are: “I’m famished.”

As the leopard queen of the predators, Malkina is (or aspires to become) one of the “Archons,” the demigods who subtly direct the action in the film from behind the scenes. Of the five principals, she’s the leading player whose greed provokes all subsequent action. When she states her intention to turn the spoils of the slaughter into diamonds at the film’s end, she’s talking about tallying up her work in terms of *souls devoured*, to fill her own emptiness. These souls can be used as bargaining chips to ascend the predatory ladder. Knowingly or not, Malkina is working for the demigods, the power elite, by providing them with the sacrificial victims they need to power the great *Maquiladora*. These are the blood offerings which feed “Jehovah” (the world bank) and keep Him “appeased.” The Mexican cartels traffic not only in drugs and money but in human flesh, specifically the flesh of young women and girls (preferably virgins), though in the end, any flesh will do. The ritual (filmed) beheadings (one of McCarthy’s black magical embellishments) are for more than just the amusement of the elite: they feed the engine that maintains the empire, giving spiritual evil a power *base* in the world. Blood cement.

## Moral Hazard

“The extinction of all reality is a concept no resignation can encompass.”

—Jefe, *The Counselor*

There are lesser characters in *The Counselor* who don't seem to be subject to the rule of this nightmare circus slaughter world, but who, like Archons, enforce the rules. The diamond dealer is one: his role is to tempt and instruct the counsellor, to tempt him *by* instructing him and vice versa. He seems like a kindly old man at first, but by the end of the movie he has started to look more like a demonic keeper of souls. If the diamond dealer is Satan, then even more unexpectedly, Jefe, the cartel member, appears to be in the role of God (the Catholic God, who is really the Jewish God in disguise?). Jefe quotes the poet Arturo Machado to the counselor over the telephone and tells it “like it is”; he's the bearer of neither good nor bad news but simply the cold, stark facts. (Truth may not have a temperature, but it can freeze your soul and burn your heart out.) As played by Rubén Blades, Jefe (it means “boss”) is the character (besides Malkina) most overtly identified with the creeping evil of the film, and yet he is also by far the wisest and most likeable character, an almost paternal presence. His sympathetic demeanor may befit such high levels of power—in McCarthy's dream reality—since true power can afford to appear “soft.” Jefe is beyond social norms of “good and evil,” he is merely an instrument of divine justice, and he gently, almost tenderly, presides over the counselor's awakening, which is his final and complete moral destruction.

As Jefe patiently explains it to him, the counselor's fatal mistake is that he “continue[s] to deny the reality of the world you are in.” He *is* the world he has created. The counselor is a victim of “moral hazard,” but also its perpetrator. There's a brief confrontation scene with an angry former client in which Laura is told that her boyfriend is the type of man to throw someone “under the bus”—i.e., sacrifice another person, often a friend or ally, undeserving of such treatment, out of malice or for personal gain. Being in a position to do that is one definition of moral hazard. In economics theory moral hazard is “any situation in which one person makes the decision about how much risk to take, while someone else bears the cost if things go badly.”

In the 1997 movie *The Devil's Advocate*, John Milton (Satan, played by Al Pacino) works as a lawyer, “because it is the ultimate backstage pass. It's the new priesthood.” Lawyers, with their enormous egos, he says, are part of every evil endeavor on the planet, because having “the ultimate backstage pass is ultimately corrupting.”<sup>1</sup>

In “Moral Hazard: A Tempest-Tossed Idea” (The New York Times, February 25, 2012) [[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/business/moral-hazard-as-the-flip-side-of-self-reliance.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/business/moral-hazard-as-the-flip-side-of-self-reliance.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) ], Shaila Dewan describes moral hazard as “an idea that Americans seem particularly preoccupied with . . . an obscure insurance term that has taken on new currency in our troubled economy.”

We've heard a lot about moral hazard lately, first in connection with the bailouts for big banks, and now with efforts to help homeowners who got in over their heads. Moral hazard sounds like the name of a video game set in a bordello, but in economic terms it refers to the undue risks that people are apt to take if they don't have to bear the consequences. In other words, if the money is free, why not spend it on a designer purse? If you know that you'll be bailed out, why not roll the dice on some tricky mortgage investments—or splurge on a home that you can't really afford? Moral hazard became part of the national conversation in the financial crisis of 2008, when ordinary Americans wondered why they should rescue banks that helped drive the economy off a cliff. . . . The specter of moral hazard haunts a basic tension in American life: to what extent are people responsible for their own problems? The more trouble you're in, moral hazard suggests, the less we should help.

In economic theory, a moral hazard is a situation where individuals take risks because the potential costs won't be felt by them but by others. Moral hazard arises when an individual or institution doesn't take the full consequences of its actions and so has a tendency to act less carefully than it would otherwise, leaving others to hold responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Economists explain moral hazard as a special case of "information asymmetry": a situation in which *one party in a transaction has more information than another*. In particular, moral hazard may occur when someone who is insulated from risk has more information about their actions and intentions than the person or persons paying for the negative consequences of the risk.

Laura pays the price of the counselor's actions because she knows almost nothing about them; the counselor likewise is acting out of ignorance and soon discovers that he's just a useful tool, or simply a handy sacrificial victim, for those with more knowledge than him. At the same time he's succumbed to the dangers of proximity contamination or conditional corruption. He's associated for so long with criminals and been offered so many temptations, crooked deals, and easy gains—and been complicit with helping criminals to continue with their criminal activities—that he doesn't even see the line he crosses until it is just a faint smudge in the distance, like the inchoate fragments of a dream after an especially brutal awakening.

## The City of Lost Women & the Hollywood Dream Factory

"With grief the normal rules of transaction do not apply. Grief transcends value, yet you cannot buy anything with grief, because grief is worthless."

—Jefe, *The Counselor*

Ciudad Juárez, where *The Counselor's* deadly drug cartel is located, has been known in Mexico since the early 1990s as "the capital of murdered women." According to a 2011 article in *The New Statesman*, "Mexico's Disappeared Women" [<http://www.newstatesman.com/south->

[america/2011/02/ciudad-juarez-women-mexico](#)], locals believe the killings are “a form of blood sport for the city’s elite,” and/or related to satanic cults, snuff films and organ theft. Investigations into the disappearances by the Mexican authorities are said to be “perfunctory,” and an accurate number of victims seems impossible to gauge. *El Diario* (the local paper) estimated 878 women killed between 1993 and 2010, but locals put the figure in the thousands. A vast desert surrounds the city and it often takes months for bodies to be discovered, if at all. “Often by the time the remains are found, the heat has mummified them.” Inevitably, the number of women reported missing is far higher than that of confirmed dead (bodies found).

Some of the most powerful companies in the US have installed factories in Chihuahua (the state where Juárez is), including Ford, General Electric, General Motors, RCA and Chrysler. These factories are known as *maquiladoras*. Creating “an abundance of jobs,” the *maquiladoras* have attracted a steady stream of arrivals to Chihuahua, and to Juárez in particular, from all over Mexico and (presumably) even from Central and South America. A significant portion of this influx of hopeful workers are young women. *The New Statesman* reports:

Not only are *maquiladoras* implicated in the city’s broader problems, but often their own staff are victims of kidnapping and murder. The factories operate 24 hours a day. White buses move around the suburbs, collecting women for their long shifts. The lack of security on these routes has been blamed for many of the disappearances. The buses leave the women near their homes, not at or outside them. This obliges them to walk the unlit streets, where many are kidnapped.

The picture is one of a tightly organized, long-term and large-scale agenda for the luring and abduction of women, in which US corporations, as well as local managers and government officials, are at least indirectly implicated. Certainly the locals blame the police and politicians, and to some extent probably the factory owners too, for what’s happening. One woman whose daughter went missing insists that the authorities “know where this problem is coming from and there are people who know the places where these girls are being tortured.” The places are strip clubs and brothels found throughout Mexico. (The woman was told by a young girl who had been kidnapped but later escaped that her daughter was working in Puebla, more than a day’s bus ride from Juárez.) Throughout the streets of Juárez, photographs of missing women can be seen on storefronts, house walls and lamp posts. Meanwhile gangs of teenagers “drive around, waiting for instructions about their next hit [or abduction?], for which they are paid as little as £10 [or less than \$20].”

The article describes the overall mood of the city’s inhabitants as one of numbness and despair, a kind of nihilistic resignation to the forces of corruption that have overtaken their lives. *The Counselor* depicts this same world, but locates it not only in Northern Mexico but on the other side of the border, in the land where an excess of opportunity leads straight to hell. The counselor pursues his happiness by making deals with the Mexican drug cartel to secure his diamond and his girl, but loses them both to the chthonic forces of chaos which he’s invoked. He realizes that his life isn’t worth living without that “glory”—the *anima* being his own soul—

and so he follows both the girl and the diamond to Hell, also known as Juárez. By this relatively selfless act, he surrenders to the inevitable consequences of his own thoughtlessness. Unlike Orpheus, he can't bargain with Hades; the Plutonian forces don't care about his suffering (though they share their wisdom with him). The counselor soon learns he can't ever bring Laura out, that he can't even trade places with her (though he is willing). All he can do is take up residence there, hopeless and alone, and submit to his fate, signified by a DVD brought to his room (by a child) which we can only presume contains a snuff movie of Laura's torture and murder, a jolly "Hola!" scrawled on it, welcoming him to Hell. Like a corpse trapped inside a barrel, floating endlessly inside a septic tank, the counselor has submitted to the nightmare in which he lives in, the nightmare he has created.

On the other hand, the film does offer a dim ray of hope, a crack in the barrel, a possible way through the unremitting darkness that follows "the extinction of all reality." The diamond dealer assures the counselor that "At our noblest we announce to the darkness that we will not be diminished by the brevity our lives." Jefe tells the counselor the story of the poet Arturo Machado, who only became a poet after his beloved died prematurely. "I'm not going to become a poet," the counselor replies grimly. Jefe assures him it wouldn't help him if he did, yet the point has been made, and the reference to the despised, buried philosopher's stone which reveals the true nature of all our plans indicates that there is a "treasure" to be found once all hope and meaning—"all reality"—has been cruelly and irrevocably extinguished.

In *The Matrix*, Thomas Anderson's emergence from the dream he has been living inside is traumatic; he's told that they rarely take people out of the matrix after a certain age because their minds can't take it. Thomas gets off lightly: he only has to throw up. The protagonist of *The Counselor* isn't so lucky; in the film's centerpiece and strongest scene, he is given clear vision of the truth and what he sees crushes his soul. In these scenes *The Counselor* gets closer I think to showing the true price of awakening than just about any movie ever made. Its spiritual clout is in the absolute logic of the horror that befalls its protagonist. The meaningless depravity which he becomes prey to is *an exact response* to his own thoughtless, blind, and greedy pursuit of personal happiness in a universe that does not tolerate blindness, that punishes it as ruthlessly as any imaginary avenging God ever punished "evildoers."

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If spiritual awakening is the psychological equivalent of being skinned alive, that's what the counselor gets. The counselor's world (which is our world) is built on the blind exploitation of others for the sake of personal self-gratification, a world in which the human soul (*anima*) has been harnessed to *maquiladoras* and become fuel for the most depraved kind of dreaming. The price of unchecked greed is never-ending grief. The world of *The Counselor* may seem disproportionately bleak, however. One particularly obtuse critic complained that "The milk of human kindness does not flow through *The Counselor's* veins, not even close." But *The Counselor* isn't about the milk of human kindness (not even close). It's about a soul-deep corruption that's reflected by social, political realities, by historical facts.

It might seem as though, with their collection of irredeemably unsavory moral specimens, Scott and McCarthy have stacked the deck unfairly against humanity (it's certainly very different from my everyday experience of people); but on the other hand, the social realities being explored are only possible through the action (and inaction) of human beings, in which case the film does a pretty good job of imagining—albeit in archetypal, fantasy form—how those individuals might look and act. By their fruit shall we know them. It may even be a fair representation of what life among the power elite of “Hollywood” might really look like, once the tinsel has fallen from our eyes (as it must have long ago for Ridley Scott). *The Counselor* may not be art—it appears to partake of, even revel in, the same depravity it exposes—but then, it's depicting a world in which corruption has gone so deep that culture and rot are synonymous. There's no art possible that doesn't stem from, and subtly promote, moral decay. If I let *The Counselor's* dark truth all the way in, I would never watch another Hollywood movie again.

Because of this, for a Hollywood movie to draw on real world atrocities—such as the abduction, probable rape and torture, and murder of young Mexican women, and the complicity of US government organizations and big business (really the whole of western civilization, including you and me) with those atrocities—is deeply problematic. Quite apart from its philosophical accomplishments or its validity as social commentary or indictment, *The Counselor* is stylish, sensational, visceral entertainment. It cost millions of dollars to make and made millions back for its studio, including large portions for its writer, director, and stars. By using the real-life miseries of Mexicans to inject their preposterously gripping witch-brew with a powerful sense of pathos and gravitas, it could be argued that the filmmakers are exploiting that misery. The people involved in making it, after all, belong to the same capitalist elite *behind* the atrocities which the film so grippingly exposes. These are some of the people behind movies such as *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Hannibal*, *Skyfall*, *Knight and Day*, and *World War Z*. Certainly, it would be hard to see them as among the victims.

## Scott's Law

“If you think you can live in this world and be no part of it, all I can say is you're wrong.”

—Westray, *The Counselor*

On the other hand, perhaps not so hard? Ridley Scott's brother, Tony Scott, allegedly committed suicide during the filming of *The Counselor* (Ridley shut down the production for a week), and it's unavoidable that the event would have colored the film's tone. When he died, Tony Scott was in preproduction for *Top Gun 2*, with Tom Cruise.<sup>2</sup> He apparently didn't have brain cancer or any other terminal disease, as was widely reported at the time of his death as the main reason for his (alleged) suicide.<sup>3</sup> As I suggested previously, one, well-buried subtext to *The Counselor* might be as a dark commentary on Hollywood itself. While I was researching this article, I came across something at the filmmaker Alex Cox's blog [ <http://www.alexcox.com/blog> ] about the Scott brothers that seems relevant to this reading:

[The Scotts] made commercials, and when they moved to the States became absorbed into the Pentagon's Hollywood cheer-leading machine. The bros created glossy, highly dynamic recruitment propaganda like *Top Gun* and *Black Hawk Down*, and—in the case of Tony—torture propaganda in the form of *Man on Fire*. So I wonder as to the contents of the various suicide notes Tony Scott left before jumping off that bridge. For a police force famous for leaking celebrity gossip, the LAPD has been close-mouthed about the matter. Perhaps the notes were merely tender messages to his family. Perhaps they were long screeds condemning the Hollywood studios for being a duplicitous, blacklisting mafia cartel. Or—and this is what I hope—perhaps they have been kept secret because they are a *mea culpa*: an apology for the years Scott wasted his talents working for the Pentagon and the CIA, promoting torture and war. [Supporting his case for Tony Scott's involvement in US propaganda, Cox cites Tricia Jenkins' *CIA in Hollywood*, including a list of] actors, directors, writers, producers and studio execs who the author links to the CIA, usually found 1) visiting CIA headquarters to party with the spooks, 2) taking instructions from CIA, or 3) actively helping to encourage CIA recruitment. Tony Scott heads the list: Jenkins reports that CIA was particularly fond of his masterpiece *Top Gun*, “the single best recruiting tool the navy—and specifically naval aviation—ever had” and “was looking for a project that could help them do something similar.”

Conditional corruption can be defined as follows: “individuals’ unethicity does not depend on the simple calculations of cost-benefit analysis, but rather depends on the social norms implied by the dishonesty of others and also on the saliency of dishonesty.” (“Contagion and Differentiation in Unethical Behavior”

<http://people.duke.edu/~dandan/Papers/Cheating/contagion.pdf> ) Translation: people behave unethically not just because they want to get something for nothing, but because it seems like the normal thing to do. It seems normal because it *is* normal.

Outside of movies and documentaries, I don't have much personal experience of the world of lawyers and bankers, corporate criminals, CIA manipulations, drug cartels, or million dollar deals (Hollywood or otherwise). But it's probably a fair bet that, when the opportunity for moral lapses are rife—where they are even business-as-usual—the perceived risk of *not* succumbing and of getting left behind with the other “suckers” (which would include anyone more ethically-minded), or worse, becoming the victim of somebody *else's* crooked scam, may start to seem greater than the risks of giving in to corruption. If you're trained and conditioned to believe that success is the measure of your worth, then moral considerations are eventually going to get sacrificed to “good business sense.” Corruption tends to be incremental, and the nature of rot is that it obscures its own evidence, and one of the first things to go is a sense of smell. When we succumb to corrupt we don't see it as corruption. We are just doing whatever it takes to secure our own “happiness.”

McCarthy and Scott were no doubt aware of just how pressing moral hazard and conditional corruption have become over the past few years in the corporate world (which is *the world*), and they've woven these concerns into their infernal parable, deftly enough for the movie to seem grounded in current events and real-world issues, while remaining true to its own surreal

landscape of black magical realism. That's an impressive accomplishment, and it's too bad that so few people—especially so few with the power and responsibility to draw others to the film, i.e. critics—were willing or able to recognize it. But then, very few people want to recognize the truth behind *The Counselor's* elaborate fiction, since the rot being revealed is in their own basements and backyards. The septic tank carries *everyone's* shit.

Ironic detachment is the way most “sophisticated” people keep from being overwhelmed by existential horror and moral revulsion as the facts of life unfold around them. Ironic detachment is made easy by movies and TV shows (*Breaking Bad* was all ironic detachment), because they allow us to feel like we're being exposed to life's brutal, bleak realities (violence, corruption, drug addiction, disease, poverty, insanity, and moral collapse) without ever having to feel the brunt of them. This creates a “seen-it-all” superiority and cynicism that's at the same time pathetically naïve, because it magically locates all the horror outside of our own direct experience, on the other side of a movie, TV, or Ipad screen. The entertained, meanwhile, enjoy the luxurious detachment of the consumer lifestyle that's been assembled for them, by and through and as a result of all that corruption being miraculously recycled as “entertainment” (though really as instruction and ideology).

Naiveté and cynicism are synonymous in *The Counselor* because it's naïve—fatally naïve—to think we can gratify our own desires regardless of the cost to others and get away “clean.” There's always a bigger predator out there, and it will always find us eventually. The bigger we get, the tastier we start to look. That's what's waiting for Malkina too. Cynicism sets us up for the axe-fall; naiveté means we don't ever see it coming until it's too late.

As the author Michael Parenti has said (in interview [<http://www.democracynow.org/2009/3/12/parenti>] and in “Capitalism: A Self-Devouring Beast” [<http://brechtforum.org/capitalism-self-devouring-beast> ] ):

one of the functions of a capitalist state is to defend capitalism from itself, to defend capitalism from the capitalists. . . . It was Marx who said one capitalist will kill many other capitalists, that the system begins to consume itself. . . . The free market does not work. It's not free. It's not really a market; it's a plunder. . . . The plutocracy devours its own children. . . . Capitalism breeds the venal perpetrators, and rewards the most unscrupulous among them. The crimes and crises are not irrational departures from a rational system, but the converse: they are the rational outcomes of a basically irrational and amoral system.

The nature of capitalism is to expand by whatever means necessary. The members of a capitalist system are like sharks: they go where the hunting is best, where the biggest scores are to be made. When sharks run out of prey—or get too big to care about small fish—they start to feed on each other. The US and the world economy is on the verge of a shark-feeding frenzy, and since the corporate world, like the political and military world and the world of drug cartels, is run on the basis of “might is right,” unbridled aggression is the only way for power to establish

itself *as* power. The top dog is basically the last maniac standing. By the time the feeding's over, and all the food is gone, all that's left is famine, and unimaginable slaughter.

Society is a *value system*. We can't participate in those values or depend on that system without being to some degree complicit with whatever's necessary to maintain it. Just as the empty ritual of Catholic confession becomes a license for a life of sin, the humanistic values we adopt act as a *cover* for the maintenance of an inhuman system. Those walls aren't to keep the barbarians out—the real barbarians are already inside, partying till they drop atop hundred-story skyscrapers. The walls are to protect the city dwellers—us—from having to *see* the sort of barbarities that are required to maintain our civilized lifestyles. It's the machinery underneath the city, where the slaves toil, the monsters devour, and the damned wail, that is the real heart of civilization.

Audience members and critics may actively resent a movie that requires them to *think*, at least in ways they aren't accustomed to thinking and that make them uncomfortable. They may have difficulty getting to grips with a movie that's really *about* something but that doesn't tell them how to feel about it. *The Counselor* doesn't have the built-in mechanism of films like *American Beauty*, *Unforgiven*, or *Up in the Air* that allows viewers to congratulate themselves for their sensitivity and intelligence in embracing "difficult" or "radical" subject matter. These films prop up the culture that spawns them and subtly (or not-so-subtly) promote the dominant values while *appearing* to subvert them. *The Counselor* breaks the rules of engagement between viewer and content, not only by ignoring the narrative conventions (a heist movie without a heist, a "hero" who is no more than a witness to the consequences of his own lousy judgment and inadequacy), but because it doesn't offer the satisfaction of a resolution. The protagonist doesn't rescue the girl and he doesn't go on a mad killing spree to avenge her. He's swallowed up by grief and implodes in a dirty hotel room, more or less exactly like any of *us* would.

The horrors which the film piles up don't lead to any kind of catharsis—and catharsis is the unwritten, sacrosanct promise of every Hollywood action movie (and even of Hollywood "issue" movies). The film builds the internal tension to bursting point without ever providing release, emotional or otherwise. It leaves us with a knot in the gut that nothing can get rid of except amnesia or suppression.

*The Counselor* isn't about murder, it's about annihilation, existential erasure. The problems it presents aren't just social or political problems; they aren't even exclusively human ones. They are also metaphysical problems, and they are all equally unsolvable. There's no God separate from Satan, no evil one to blame and no hero-savior to save us. There's no retribution that doesn't smite the "innocent" along with the guilty, because no one is innocent in this world. There are no bystanders, to see is to participate, and to participate is to be compromised, to be complicit. *The Counselor* breaks the contract between movie and moviegoer, the contract that's says that, no matter what we see on the screen, and no matter how it makes us feel, we will not be implicated. We will be allowed to leave the theater feeling as spotless as we did when we

entered. *The Counselor* is like an *anti*-Catholic confession ritual: we come out stained by the newly gained awareness of our own hypocrisy.

My guess is that this is why audiences were so violently unreceptive to *The Counselor*. They weren't ready to look at the CAT scan and admit just how dire the prognosis is. All I can say is they're wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://usf.usfca.edu/pj/articles/devilsad.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/director-tony-scott-spent-his-final-days-researching-top-gun-2-with-tom-cruise-2012-8#ixzz24CCCUSQA>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tmz.com/2012/08/20/tony-scott-suicide-no-brain-cancer-tumor/>