

'The Counselor' Disguises Lackluster Storytelling in Philosophy

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 24, 2013 - 2:51pm

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “*That’s not what greed does; that’s what greed is.*” Cormac McCarthy’s script for “The Counselor” is so weighed down with allegedly insightful philosophy like this that it collapses into a heap of laughable, unbelievable exchanges between characters who simply don’t exist in the real world. Strip away the dialogue that couldn’t possibly be mistaken for anyone other than the author of “No Country For Old Men” and “The Road,” and McCarthy’s first film written directly for the screen has almost nothing to hold viewer interest. It is a film in which people constantly talk about what they’re doing or their belief systems in relation to crime and morality and yet none of it feels represented through narrative. It is tempting to say that it’s all foreplay and no payoff but it’s not even that. It’s all *talking about* foreplay and no payoff.

The Counselor (Michael Fassbender) has provided legal services to enough criminal types near the Juarez/Texas border for so long that he’s become intrigued enough to get involved in the lavish lifestyle himself. This world of undeniable opulence but questionable morality is represented by club owner and criminal type Reiner (Javier Bardem). With a beautiful home, lavish parties, and extravagant style, Reiner has drawn the attention of the terrifying Malkina (Cameron Diaz). She is first seen in a desert, training wild cats, and she is presented as a feline predator herself, complete with visuals (a tattoo, her eye makeup) to accompany the look of a creature stalking her prey. Malkina is the kind of powerful woman who doesn’t just laugh at the weak; she takes their money and has them killed.



The Counselor

Photo credit: Fox Pictures

On the opposite end of the female spectrum in McCarthy's vision is The Counselor's girlfriend Laura (Penelope Cruz). The Counselor adores Laura with all of his heart, and it's even implied that he enters this world of high crime to impress and keep her happy, buying her a wildly expensive engagement ring in an early scene. As with so many crime sagas, "The Counselor" hints at a world in which it is man's desire to impress the women in their lives that leads to their greatest struggles.

This amazingly talented cast is rounded out by a charismatic turn from Brad Pitt as Westray, the coordinator of the drug deal that McCarthy and director Ridley Scott really only use as background. "The Counselor" is about a multi-million dollar shipment of drugs from Mexico to Chicago that goes very wrong. And yet that aspect of the script is really nothing more than the setting for discussions about crime, murder, sex, and, of course, greed. It is clearly McCarthy's intent to leave the actual crime of the story incredibly vague and secondary to the people who get caught up in its repercussions. It's not a crime saga as much as it is a story of the inevitable tragedy that will befall the people who enter this world of incredible violence.



The Counselor

Photo credit: Fox Pictures

McCarthy could have made this material work in literature, where his gift for language and his remarkable understanding of the underlying issues that cause people to commit violent acts would have had a mesmerizing power. Film has different storytelling requirements that "The Counselor" simply doesn't contain. The Coens found a way to mold McCarthy's philosophy into storytelling that Ridley Scott doesn't seem to even attempt to do here, almost as if he considers actual story beneath the material. There's a pretension here that defies any relationship with the characters or their dilemmas. As the story approached the dark conclusion that we know McCarthy couldn't possibly avoid, I found I didn't care. The exercise in criminal philosophy had pushed me too far from the characters and story that the film needed to work.

It's not through any real fault of the performers. Fassbender struggles here more than usual but it's because he's been given such a reactionary character. From the very beginning, the nameless Counselor is really only responding to what's in front of him. We never get to know him outside of his love for Laura. Instead we sit with him through over-long scenes of awkward, unbelievable conversation with him & Reiner or Westray, in which they explain their worldviews in ways that just don't feel real. Bardem has fun and Diaz gets to shoot way past the top as the campiest character of the piece but the film is too forgettable for their work to really register. Even with all of McCarthy's undeniably intelligent consideration of the underlying issues of the world in which people like this exist, he never gives us a reason to want to visit it.

"The Counselor" stars Michael Fassbender, Javier Bardem, Cameron Diaz, Penelope Cruz, and Brad Pitt. It was written by Cormac McCarthy and directed by Ridley Scott. It is rated R and opens on October 25, 2013.



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