



The Counsellor

Director: Ridley Scott

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Production Companies: Scott Free, Nick Wechsler, Chockstone Pictures
Made in association with: TSG Entertainment, Ingenious Media

Produced in association with:

Big Screen Productions

Presented by: Fox 2000 Pictures

Executive Producers: Cormac McCarthy, Mark Huffam, Michael Schaefer, Michael Costigan

Produced by: Ridley Scott, Nick Wechsler, Steve Schwartz, Paula Mae Schwartz

Line Producer - UK: Mary Richards

Line Producers - Spain: Denise O'Dell, Mark Albela

Associate Producer: Teresa Kelly

Unit Production Manager: Yousaf Bokhari

Production Manager: Sara Desmond

Production Co-ordinator: Samantha Black

Financial Controller: Maggie Phelan

Production Accountant: Karin Mercurio

Supervising Location Manager: James Grant

Location Manager: Matt Jones

1st Assistant Director: Max Keene

2nd Assistant Directors: Matt Baker, Jairo Murray

Co-second Assistant Director: Danny McGrath

Script Supervisor: Annie Penn

Casting by: Nina Gold, Avy Kaufman

Written by: Cormac McCarthy

Director of Photography: Dariusz Wolski

Lighting Technicians: Mark Clark, Jamie Mills,

David Sinfield, James Smart

Camera Operators: Graham Hall, Daniele

Massaccesi, Julian Morson, Stefan Stankowski

Gaffer: Perry Evans

Key Grip: Kevin Fraser

Stills Photographer: Kerry Brown

Visual Effects by: MPC

Senior Visual Effects Supervisor: Richard Stammers

Special Effects Supervisor: Stefano Pepin

Animatronic Designers: Rick Marr, Peter Hawkins,

Martin Jago, Graham Riddell

Editor: Pietro Scalia

Production Designer: Arthur Max

Supervising Art Director: Marc Homes

Art Directors: Ben Munro, Alex Cameron,

Alejandro Fernández

Set Decorator: Sonja Klaus

Graphic Designer: Felicity Hickson

Concept Artist: Kim Frederiksen

Property Master: Terry Wood

Costume Designer: Janty Yates

Costume Supervisors: Clare Spragge,

Cristina Sopena

Make-up Designer: Tina Earnshaw

Make-up Artists: Aisling Nairn, Polly Earnshaw

Hair Designer: Nana Fischer

Hairdressers: Maralyn Sherman, Luca Saccuman,

Lois McIntosh

Prosthetics Supervisor: Conor O'Sullivan

Senior Prosthetics Make-up: Robert Trenton

Senior Prosthetics Modeller: Brian Best

Main Title and End Titles by: Momoco

Music: Daniel Pemberton

Music Supervisor: Pietro Scalia

Sound Design: Oliver Tarney

Production Sound Mixer: Simon Hayes

Re-recording Mixers: Chris Burdon, Doug Cooper

Supervising Sound Editor: Oliver Tarney

Sound FX Designer: Michael Fentum

Ridley Scott: Building Cinematic Worlds

The Counsellor

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

As Chekhov famously remarked, 'If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there.' Ridley Scott and his screenwriter Cormac McCarthy follow Chekhov's dictum to the letter. Early on in *The Counsellor*, flamboyant bon viveur Reiner (Javier Bardem) describes to his El Paso lawyer friend the Counsellor (Michael Fassbender) an ingenious mechanised garrotting device called a *bolito*. It's slipped over the victim's head, and a small electric motor at the side steadily tightens a wire around the throat until the carotid artery is severed. It can't be removed or stopped – death is inevitable. And in the last few minutes of the film we see just such a device used on drug-dealing middleman Westray (Brad Pitt) in the incongruous surroundings of a daytime street in the City of London. Westray desperately tries to impede the *bolito* by slipping his fingers under it, and as he collapses on the pavement with blood spurting from his throat we're granted – just to enhance the effect of the scene – a close-up of his outflung hand, the fingers sliced off.

Likewise, at an earlier juncture Westray, trying to impress on the Counsellor the kind of people he's getting involved with, gives him a graphic account of a snuff movie one cartel made for a rich client in which a teenage girl was decapitated before the client fucked the headless corpse. 'The point is, Counsellor,' he adds, 'you may think there are things that these people would simply be incapable of. There are not.' So when at the end of the movie the Counsellor, holed up in a Ciudad Juárez flophouse, receives a video disc with 'Hola!' scrawled on it, he collapses on the floor weeping in anguish. He has no need to view the disc to know what it shows – and, since we've seen the headless body of his beloved fiancée Laura (Penélope Cruz) dumped out on to a garbage tip, neither have we.

Westray's remarks aren't the only time the Counsellor is warned that he's moving into territory more dangerous than he could imagine, and that he's totally unsuited to dealing with. 'If you pursue this road that you've embarked upon,' Reiner predicts when he first proposes their deal, 'you'll eventually come to moral decisions that will take you completely by surprise – ones you didn't see coming at all.' Despite which he persists, precipitating along with his own ruin the violent death of most of his associates and of the woman he loves. As a Mexican police chief whose help he seeks tells him, 'You continue to deny the reality of the world you're in.' His job title – we never learn the character's name – is highly ironic: not only does he rarely seem to counsel anybody, but this is a man who seems quite incapable of taking advice on his own account.

Right from the outset, we come to realise, the Counsellor has unknowingly crossed a border between the comfortable world he's accustomed to and one in which no rules apply – or none that he can comprehend. Worse, it's a border that can only be crossed in one direction; there's no going back. 'The world in which you seek to undo your mistakes,' the jefe explains, 'is not the world in which they were made. You are at a crossroads and here you think to choose. But here there is no choosing. There is only accepting. The choosing was done a long time ago.'

The concept of a border between the relatively civilised, ordered world in which most of us think we live, and a world in which there are no rules and the most unspeakable things will be done simply because they can be done, is central to the work of McCarthy, whose first original film script this is. The three novels –

Sound FX Editor: James Harrison
Stunt Co-ordinator: Rob Inch
In Memory of: Matt Baker
Cast:

Michael Fassbender (*counsellor*)
Penélope Cruz (*Laura*)
Cameron Diaz (*Malkina*)
Javier Bardem (*Reiner*)
Brad Pitt (*Westray*)
Bruno Ganz (*diamond dealer*)
Rosie Perez (*Ruth*)
Sam Spruell (*wireman*)
Toby Kebbell (*Tony*)
Edgar Ramirez (*priest*)
Rubén Blades (*Jefe*)
Natalie Dormer (*blonde*)
Goran Visnjic (*banker*)
Cesar Aguirre (*truck driver #1*)
Daniel Holguín (*truck driver #2*)
Chris Obi (*Malkina's bodyguard*)
Paris Jefferson (*waitress*)
Dar Dash (*barman*)
Richard Cabral (*young biker*)
Alex Hafner (*highway patrolman*)
Andrea Deck (*watching girl*)
Emma Rigby (*Tony's girlfriend*)
Eben Young (*bike clerk*)
Richard Brake (*second man*)
Barbara Durkin (*cafe waitress*)
Giannina Facio (*woman with mobile phone*)
Velibor Topic (*sedan man*)
Juan Jose Rodriguez (*junkyard man*)
Alexander Biggie (*junkyard boy #1*)
Pablo Paredes (*junkyard boy #2*)
Cavassa Ventura (*3rd man killer*)
Frank Spano (*man with bar*)
Alejandro Marzal (*man with pistol*)
Gerard Monaco (*hotel waiter*)
Fernando Cayo (*abogado*)
Dean Norris (*buyer*)
Carlos Julio Molina (*workman*)
Donna Air (*chauffeur*)
Marco Tulio Luna Ramirez (*cafe man*)
Lida Cardona (*mourning lady*)
Roger Dalmases (*delivery boy*)
Julien Vialon (*maitre'd*)
UK-USA 2013©
117 mins
Digital

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All the Pretty Horses, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain* – that brought him to international fame have been grouped together as ‘The Border Trilogy’ and in all of them (as in his earlier *Blood Meridian*) the US-Mexican border stands as a metaphor for this key dichotomy. In Mexico (or at least in McCarthy’s vision of it) the dreams and aspirations that maybe seemed harmless enough a few dozen miles to the north must be paid for in blood, pain and death. (The vision isn’t so far from the truth, as we’re reminded when the Counsellor stumbles on a street demonstration demanding justice for the hundreds of young women murdered or disappeared in Chihuahua State in recent years.)

Given this blacker-than-hell world of perpetual treachery and limitless violence, it scarcely matters that for most of the film it’s hard to tell just who’s double-, triple- or quadruple-crossing whom and why. All that counts is the result: that the consignment of drugs that sets out from Ciudad Juárez concealed in a septic-tank truck, having been hijacked two or three times en route, duly arrives at its destination in Chicago; that by then several of those involved are dead, or soon will be; that the Counsellor has lost everything except – as yet – his life; and that one person, Reiner’s erstwhile girlfriend Malkina, has gained everything.

Malkina (Cameron Diaz), svelte and feline, her smile like a sliver of ice, first appears lounging in a folding chair on the Texan prairie at sunset, watching two cheetahs hunt jack-rabbits while Reiner mixes her a martini. Her identification with the predators is absolute; later, as she indulges in poolside girly chat with Laura, we see that she has a cheetah-print tattoo extending from her shoulder to the back of her thigh. And in the film’s final scene, lunching with her banker Michael (Goran Visnjic) in London, having engineered the death of her lover, of Laura and of several others, she names as her sole regret the loss of the two big cats. ‘To see a quarry killed with elegance,’ she observes, ‘it’s moving to me.’

In the title role, Fassbender channels a hint of the solipsism of his sex-addict in *Shame* into his portrayal of a man rather too enamoured of his own glitzy lifestyle and not as smart as he thinks he is. (‘They know that you’re stupid,’ Westray comments, referring again to the faceless cartels. ‘They just don’t know how stupid.’) He’s backed by a 24-carat cast that includes, along with Bardem (sporting another notably eccentric hairstyle after *No Country for Old Men*, this time with his dark locks coruscating about his head as if he’s been electrocuted), Diaz, Pitt and Cruz, a rich roster of cameos: Visnjic, Bruno Ganz as a philosophical Amsterdam diamond merchant, Rosie Perez as a jailbird who’s seemingly the Counsellor’s only client and Rubén Blades as the fatalistic police chief.

Given how completely it exemplifies McCarthy’s sardonic, pessimistic and mercilessly retributive worldview (worth recalling that he was raised Catholic), it’s tempting to treat *The Counsellor* largely as his film. But he’s teamed up with Ridley Scott, a protean director who can switch seamlessly from the explicit sensual heat of the opening bedroom scene between Laura and the Counsellor, to the virtuoso machine-gun editing of a scene where a motorcyclist is decapitated at 200 mph on a desert road, to the Counsellor’s inexorable descent into the City of Dreadful Night that is Juárez, its dark tawdry streets often recalling *Blade Runner*. Between them, Scott and McCarthy have created a film that in less accomplished hands could have slumped into melodrama, but that retains the grim humour, and the granitic implacability, of a classic morality tale.

Phillip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, December 2013