

The Management of Drug Traffic

Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics

By Curtis Marez

Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2004. 384 pp.

ISBN: 0-8166-4060-2. Paperback. \$19.95

Review by Dan Warner

In *Drug Wars*, Curtis Marez contends that the “war on drugs” is not just fought in the streets of LA or the jungles of Colombia, but also in the media products that result from the condensations and displacements of this internecine geopolitical struggle. He describes the war on drugs as a “mass media event,” and argues that much like dreams are the “royal road to the unconscious,” media portrayals of drug wars provide “cognitive maps” (a term borrowed from Frederic Jameson) of the battlefields in which subaltern populations and elites clash over drug traffic and political freedom. Starting with this premise, he sets out to read the drug war’s many media products (both from elite and subaltern sources) to unearth the central tensions—and pretensions—that fuel this seemingly endless conflict.

Marez’s book is divided into an introduction and three sections. The three sections are entitled, in order, Opium, Marijuana, and Cocaine. These titles, however, are slightly deceptive, for each chapter does not offer an exhaustive account of the media portrayals of these substances. In Marez’s work, in fact, the actual narcotic under discussion is usually much less important than the geopolitical and economic factors of a given historical epoch and the way a certain drug will emerge as the means to control subaltern populations within the prevailing power structure. Each section covers a different historical moment, quite separate from the others. In each example, we see the way representations of subalterns, elites, and narcotics inform our understanding of the power structure during their unique historical epoch.

In Opium, Marez discusses the British Opium Wars, and the way the control and trafficking of opium fit into the larger project of British imperialism in South East Asia. The media under discussion here are short silent films, English literary magazines, stories written by the likes of Dickens, Doyle, Kipling and Wilde, and various political tracts that reference opium and Chinese labor. In Marijuana, Marez moves to the 1920s and 1930s

United States, where Mexican laborers, capitalist New Mexican landowners, Hollywood producers, and Los Angeles police officers battled both physically and with media images over property and salary. The last section, Cocaine, focuses on European imperialism over indigenous populations in the Americas. This section discusses two distinct historical moments. The first is the late 19th Century, where Freud's cocaine texts are scrutinized for their disavowal of the Indian labor exploitation that makes his use of "Über Coca" possible. In the cocaine section's second chapter, Marez provides a close analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Almanac of the Dead*. He argues that Silko's book provides a subaltern cognitive map of the 1980s cocaine drug trade, and as such offers a powerful counternarrative to Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, which dominated the mainstream media of the time.

In this review, my goal is to demonstrate the basic assumptions of Marez's analysis: How he grounds his work in the contemporary state of the drug war, and the method he uses to untie the various cathected objects which pose as props in drug war media to reveal their underlying geopolitical realities.

Marez begins by noting that "although official rhetoric focuses on ending drug abuse, state policies have often had the opposite effect" (1). This is true not only in the United State's explicit support for the drug trafficking that benefits its national interest (such as the trans-American cocaine trade of the early 1980s, or the 1970s heroine trade in South East Asia), but also in the way that the notion of a "drug war" itself justifies increasing state power in order to manage and control subaltern populations within its own borders. The elimination of the drug trade is not the real goal, Marez argues, for "drug enforcement is part of a larger set of ideologies and practices that might be better described as the management of drug traffic" (2). Management of drug trade is more useful to the state, because the continued trafficking of drugs gives justification for the increase of state power. "The demand for drugs is not, strictly speaking, the enemy of state power," he argues, "rather, drug demand is a sustaining object of power" (5).

With the demand constant, a public health response would only make sense, much as the way society addresses such problems as the continued persistence of broken limbs or cancer is through education and access to services. Instead, most of the funding for "fighting" the drug war has gone towards the increased militarization of the conflict. Demand is not ad-

dressed, but instead the suppliers are hunted through the use of AK-47s, rocket launchers, helicopter surveillance, and the like – all tools traditionally kept for military, not police, action. As Marez points out, the war on drugs has “practically nullified the Posse Comitatus Act, a law that made it illegal to use the military to conduct civilian police action” (4).

This reterritorialization of the legal landscape has been paralleled through a reterritorialization of the genre landscapes in Hollywood film. Marez points out that a divide once existed in Hollywood film, with cops and robber shoot-outs being held mostly with pistols and rifles, reserving the images of heavy artillery for war films. This has changed over the last 30 years, and the Brian De Palma’s film, *Scarface*, represents a crucial moment in the transition. *Scarface* was one of the first films to depict the increased militarization of the domestic drug war, and as such brought heavy artillery, high powered surveillance, and rocket launchers into the cop genre, much as the war on drugs brought these tools into the domestic life of subalterns in the United States. *Scarface* impacted popular culture, becoming a seminal text which continues to be referenced in the gangster rap genre, as well as the many copycat films which it has spawned. Marez argues, “if Uzis and AK-47s have been appropriate for U.S. film and rap narratives, then, it is in part because the militarization of the drug-war has made such weapons available for cultural work” (12). Today it is common to think of the drug wars in terms of military action, and even those who have no direct interaction with the traffic of drugs, have these images to refer to. For example,

Cocaine culture and the war on drugs is sown into every aspect of the film: from its “swooping crane shots,” which evoke the notion of military surveillance, to the use of a “synchronizer” which synchronizes the firing of the prop-machine guns with the camera in order to better capture the machine gun “flash.” In fact, the film’s very color scheme, “a high-tech visual palette [of] rich reds, pinks, purples, and blues,” was derived from the flash of machine gun fire (13).

With this analysis, Marez demonstrates how just one cultural object, *Scarface*, condenses the drug war’s intensification of state power in both its content and form. However, the war on drugs has other implications. Drug suppliers do not emerge out of a vacuum. Marez points out that the neo-liberal ideology that controls the world economy leaves subaltern people, both domestically and internationally, “with few opportunities for

survival other than drug production" (6) and distribution. Through this work, these populations begin to gain capital, and with it, the means to enact their agency both domestically and internationally. It is this, Marez argues, that is most troubling to the state. That is to say, it is not just the impact of drug use that worries the elites, but the power that the subaltern could gain by being paid for the services they provide, and using that pay to organize against state power. It is for this reason that the war on drugs is fought against the poor corner drug pusher and the Colombian peasant cocaine farmer, instead of the investment banks which funnel billions of "narcocapital" across borders on a daily basis. Bankers, in fact, will often plead ignorance to the source of dirty money, and walk away from any legal interdiction when they are caught funneling illegal dollars. In contrast, a welfare mother can lose her house if her daughter's live-in boyfriend has drugs on him, regardless of whether she was aware of these drugs or not. Further, the burning of peasant farms is a regular American military action in the drug war.

Marez demonstrates the way the fears of subaltern uprising is a regular motif of subaltern drug war media objects. He points out that in the mainstream, gangster rappers are typically portrayed simply as anti-police hoodlums, but a more careful analysis reveals that these texts often advance an anti-elite ideology. Marez also discusses a Mexican musical genre called *narcocorrido*, which celebrates narcotraffickers' opposition to state power. Gangster rap and narcocorridos represent powerful attempts of the subaltern to battle media hegemony, and thus the geopolitical battle becomes intertwined with a battle of representation. In both Mexico and the United States, the anti-state messages of these genres (and similar ones) are marginalized from the mainstream media, manifesting the drug war in a battle for airtime.

These careful analyses of cultural production construct the bulk of *Drug Wars*. The geopolitical landscape is read like a traumatic real under the screen memories of films, music, advertising, novels, and the like. A common structure emerges across all of the historical moments under scrutiny: Capitalists and the state provide media images that try to marginalize subaltern experiences of the drug war, and the subaltern try to hack these representations for either their own amusement, or to at least defy the power imposed upon them. *Drug Wars* provides a compelling demonstration of this structure across several eras and amidst several struggles, not the least of which continues in the contemporary North American society.