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## CHAPTER 41

# CRIME FICTION AND NARCOTICS

Andrew Pepper

Narcotics – or what are colloquially called “drugs” – enter the realm of the crime story in a number of instructive ways. First and most importantly, they are a commodity, to be bought and sold for profit, and where the profit margins to be accrued are enhanced by a set of moral and political decisions taken around the issue of prohibition. The mind-altering properties of drugs, whether illegal or otherwise (for example, the way they work on “the chemical messengers in the neurophysiological system” (Herlinghaus 2013: 2)) are also a factor in determining demand and hence price but the categorical definition of what constitutes “drugs” is not at all clear. As Derrida notes, “the concept of drugs is not a scientific concept, but is rather instituted on the basis of moral or political evaluations” (qtd. in Herlinghaus 2013: 8). As such, we could argue that “the existing moral and legal separations between alcohol and sugar, on the one hand, and hashish and cocaine, on the other are nothing less than arbitrary” (Herlinghaus 2013: 3). Nonetheless, prohibition measures produce a whole machinery of state interdiction and a set of attendant moves to close supply routes and arrest drug traffickers. This, in turn, produces the kind of “good” cops versus “bad” traffickers narrative that has been a genre staple since as far back as Robin Moore’s *The French Connection* (1969). The drug trade is also a commercial enterprise and therefore the thematisation of the drug trade as a business in crime fiction allows for critical reflection on the proximity of the legal and illegal and organised crime and capitalism; a point underscored by Roberto Saviano’s astute claim that “[t]he rules of drug trafficking [...] are also the rules of capitalism” (2013: viii). The drug trade also has a long history that dates at least as far back as the Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860) in which the British army, in consort with the East India Company, sought to forcibly compel China to open its border to opium cultivated in India – an early conflagration of commerce and imperial force in order to establish new territories for state-sanctioned capitalism (see Paley 2014: 6).

If the intricacies of these events were not directly captured by crime fiction of the era, their effects were explored in more oblique ways as drugs entered the public and private spaces of the Victorian crime story. Narcotics, of course, became a plot staple of the crime story from *The Moonstone* (1868) onwards, either where the mind-altering properties of drugs are key to the working out of the narrative, as in Collins’s novel, or where the protagonist’s drug-taking habits allude to a darker, unsettling aspect of their character, e.g. Sherlock Holmes’s cocaine binges (*The Sign of Four*, 1890). The thematisation of drug taking in this crime fiction and the references in Doyle’s stories to opium dens (e.g. “The Man with the Twisted Lip”) also work to situate the metropolitan “centre” as a nodal point in a wider network of colonial routes and actors (Mukherjee 2003). This places the emerging crime story in a necessarily global context, where the material presence and effects of drugs requires or presupposes an interpretative framework that is capable of moving between local, national and global spaces and where this presence in turn situates the crime story within an expansive network of affiliations and transactions that link Western consumption habits to (exploitative) growing and production cycles in the Global South. Another consequence of this move is that the Western body that consumes drugs becomes effectively Orientalised. In a contemporary context, the representation of the global drugs trade and the globally focused efforts of state enforcement practices allow crime writers to push their interrogations into further-reaching critical terrain; e.g. to explore the nature and limits of sovereignty, the role of borders in an era of so-called

“free trade” and the causes and contexts of the violence which is now so central to our understanding of the “war on drugs”.

In my chapter, I consider three aspects of this brief outline of the relationship between crime fiction and drugs. First, I look in more detail at the early representations of drug taking, e.g. in what we might call (English) classical and (US) hardboiled examples. Rather than setting up an unhelpful division between these two modes of writing, my focus is on the ways that both sets of writers use the mind-bending properties of drugs to put pressure on assumptions about their detectives’ rationality and capacity to bring order to the narrative and their worlds. In these novels, emphasis is placed on the particularities and consequences of individual drug taking, without any explicit acknowledgement of the “role that narcotic plants from the New World” and indeed the Global South “have played, across the centuries, in the transatlantic formation of Western modernity” (Herlinghaus 2013: 2). In the second section, and following Herlinghaus’s concept of “narcoepics” or “new, transnational, epics of sobriety” (2013: 29), I look briefly at two crime novels by Mexican authors – Juan Pablo Villalobos’s *Fiesta en la madriguera* (2010) [*Down The Rabbit Hole*, 2011] and Yuri Herrera’s *La Transmigración de los cuerpos* (2013) [*The Transmigration of Bodies*, 2016] – where the violence and exploitation of the narco economy is figured obliquely and where an ethical imperative to show us something of this world is set alongside a counter-move that refuses to directly address “the socio-economic forms of violence that generate from informal labor and illicit drug trafficking across the Western hemisphere” (Herlinghaus 2013: 35). In the final section, I offer a more detailed discussion of Don Winslow’s *The Power of the Dog* (2006), which adopts an alternative ethical stance; namely to represent as much as possible and to try and connect different global spaces via an expansive account of violence and exploitation. Here the corporatisation or “neo-liberalisation” of the drugs business (“catching the drug business up with the times” (2006: 310)) is tied to the actions and behaviours of “endriago” (translated as monster) figures who are the “ultraviolent, destructive subjects of gore capitalism” and use “violence as a tool of empowerment and capital acquisition” (Valencia 2018: 134). In order to complicate the master narrative of the “war on drugs”, the (“bad”) drug cartels and the (“good”) state interdiction machinery come together as a single “cartel” to further “the territorial and social expansion of capitalism” (Paley 2014: 6). It is here, as I will argue in the conclusion, that the critical potential of crime fiction about drugs is most self-evident.

### **Drugs, Colonialism and Addiction**

The central mystery of *The Moonstone* hinges on two related items: opium and a stolen diamond. They are related insofar as both have their origins in India and were acquired, forcibly or through colonial trade (i.e. violent dispossession), by figures from the English ruling classes. In Collins’s novel, the question of how Rachel Verinder could have seen her suitor, the otherwise upstanding Franklin Blake, steal the priceless diamond from her is cleared up by Ezra Jennings, an aspiring doctor and opium addict, who proposes that Blake acquired the stone unknowingly, while under the “spiritualised intoxication of opium” (443). Opium and the appropriated diamond – an example of what Harvey has called “accumulation by dispossession” (2005: 144) – are implicated in practices of colonial trade which, while not entirely condemned by Collins, contribute to the fraying or unravelling of society and self. The pursuit of the diamond and the “eating” of opium are both threats to the social norms of Victorian society and the belief in the rational capacities of individual actors – and both must be exposed and marginalised in order for these norms to be restored. If this manoeuvre does not entirely banish anxieties about the iniquities of colonial theft or about the mind-altering capacities of imported drugs like opium, it allays them to some extent. Some of this ambivalence can also be found in the early Sherlock Holmes stories such as *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) where Watson’s concerns about the effects of drug taking and addiction, prompted by

noticing the “dreamy, vacant expression” in his friend’s eyes, are a little at odds with the values of “cleanliness and temperance” that Holmes purports to live by (1992: 14). In *The Sign of Four*, meanwhile, the presence of a “hypodermic syringe” filled with a “seven percent solution” of cocaine and the sight of Holmes’s “wrist all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks” (1992: 64) raises, for Watson and hence the reader, the troubling spectre of addiction and the “potential loss of those great powers with which [he has] been endowed” (1992: 64).

In the end, the threat posed by narcotics (which were legally available in late nineteenth-century London) to both narrative coherence and the sanctity and rationality of character is managed. Just as in *The Moonstone*, where the seemingly unanswerable question of why Blake “stole” the diamond is resolved in such a way that his name is cleared and he is free to marry Rachel Verinder, Holmes’s predilection for cocaine does not damage his mental faculties, and in the stories collected as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892) onward, we hear little or nothing more about his drug taking – a move usually tied to Doyle’s association with The Strand (Pittard 2011). As such, drugs, like the colonial trade which brought them to England in the first place, and the crimes which Holmes and Blake investigate, are banished to the social margins or occluded from our view.

The same occlusion occurs in the novels of Dashiell Hammett, where drugs constitute part of the fabric of endemic criminality – e.g. the “chalk-white and eyeless” face of a drugged-up Rhea Gutman reflect a more general baseness and venality (1982: 518) – but are not visible as one of the commodities (e.g. gold, money, the falcon itself) which circulate as part of a global network of exchange linking Europe, the US and East Asia (see Pepper, forthcoming). The difference vis-à-vis the earlier stories of Collins and Doyle is one of degree: while Franklin Blake has no notion that he “stole” the diamond under the influence of opium, until it is raised as a possibility later on in the narrative by Ezra Jennings, Hammett’s the Continental Op is roused from a gin and laudanum-induced slumber, and strange, mixed-up dreams, to find an ice pick driven into the chest of his drinking partner and sometimes admirer, Dinah Brand. At the time, he has no idea whether he might have done the deed, given his “right hand held the round blue and white handle of Dinah Brand’s ice-pick” (1982: 147). Here, the mind-altering capacities of laudanum are stitched more directly into a realm of violence and lawlessness of which the detective is very much a part; as the Op admits, when he says, in a chapter entitled “Laudanum”, “this is the first time I’ve ever got the fever. It’s this damned burg. You can’t go straight here. I got myself tangled at the beginning” (1982: 139). The Op is not an addict but *Red Harvest* (1929) looks ahead to other crime-related stories like Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1975) where trafficking and violence are brought into explosive conflagration and where the consequences of addiction and the proximity of the drug trade as business to the wider logic of capitalism and imperialism is easily visible.

### **Narcoepics and the Ethics of Not Seeing**

On one level, it makes good sense to look at “the worldwide drug industry [...] as if it were a business like any other” (Wainwright 2016: 3) and crime fiction has enthusiastically contributed to this task, notably in relation to the Pablo Escobar-inspired, and post-Escobar, global expansion of the cocaine business, as depicted in the Netflix TV-series *Narcos* (2015-). But the revolution of the drug business, first in Colombia and then in Mexico, has also resulted in a cataclysmic upsurge in violence, which in turn has required crime writers to address the knotty issue of what and how to represent and the ethics implicit in these decisions. Winslow’s *The Power of the Dog*, as we shall see, is very much motivated by an ethics of full disclosure – showing us the visceral horrors and brutalities of the drug trade in order to illuminate the same violent logic at the heart of contemporary capitalism. However, the refusal of two so-called “narcoepics” from Mexico to do likewise is motivated by an alternative ethical position

premised on evasion, elision and partial disclosure, one where we can never fully see the folds between capitalism, globalisation and the emergence of new constellations of power and violence.

The challenge of perspective is central to Villalobos's *Down the Rabbit Hole* where we see the operations of the nameless Mexican cartel from the perspective of Tochtli, a young boy, who sees but does not fully understand what is at stake when bodies are made. "The most normal thing to do is to cut off the head", he declares, "although, actually, you can cut anything" (10). With little or no understanding of the logic of supply and demand which drives capitalism and indeed the drug trade, Tochtli's consumption demands become increasingly outlandish to us, rather than to him, and reach their apotheosis in the form of a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus. To Tochtli, who owns hats "from all around the world", a hippo is the logical next step: "I've already written it down on the list of things I want and given it to Miztli" (5). In one sense, of course, given the ubiquity of violence and the global nature of consumer capitalism, it is neither absurd to see death as normal nor outlandish to make such niche consumption demands. But when, having travelled with his father and other members of the cartel to Liberia, and secured two pygmy hippos from traders, with "ears [...] just how I imagined them: miniscule like bullets from a tiny little gun" (42), the animals fall ill after they've been sedated and packed into crates, requiring one of the cartel to shoot them. At this point the horror of the situation becomes apparent even to Tochtli: "I squealed horribly as if I was a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus who wanted the people listening to want to be dead so they didn't have to hear me" (49). Or does it? Because what kind of work, metaphorical or otherwise, is being enacted by the hippos and their harrowing deaths? And what is the significance of the novel's move from Mexico to Liberia and back to Mexico? In a moment, Villalobos allows us to see the senseless violence of the global drugs trade by showing us the needless slaughter of two hippos but the moment passes and after the hippos' heads have been shipped to Mexico and hung on the wall as adornments, we are left to ask what if anything has been learnt and what is the place of the hippos, dead and/or alive, in the wider systems of trade and violence that Tochtli and we as readers cannot fully see or understand.

In this slim novel, Villalobos asks us what can and, more importantly, what cannot be seen and understood about the drug business as a global business and about the nature of the violence it enacts and perpetuates. In *The Transmigration of Bodies*, Herrera places a character known as The Redeemer in the middle of a terse stand-off between two rival narco-gangs and where the narco-violence may or may not be connected to, but nonetheless finds an analogy with, a plague which has afflicted and laid waste to the poorer parts of a nameless Mexican city "overtaken by sinister insects" (15): "The disease came from a bug and the bug only hung around in squalid areas" (9). The speed and arbitrariness of infection and death – "two men in a restaurant, total strangers, started spitting blood almost simultaneously and collapsed over their tables" (10) – produces an epidemic of death and surplus of bodies that finds an equivalent in the "destructive potentiality" of narco-accumulation and violence whereby "[l]iving people are raw materials for the work of the sicarios, and dead bodies are the product" (Biron 2012: 820). But how exactly is a malarial disease equivalent to a man-made feud – between the Castros and Fonsecas who are described as "[p]oor as dirt a couple of decades ago, now too big for their boots, and neither had moved out of the barrio" (33)? In the same way that we cannot see the bugs that infect the blood of the living, the drugs which fuel and perpetuate the competition between the Castros and the Fonsecas remain hidden from view, as do the bodies (of the narco violence and/or the plague?) which may or may not be on board "a convoy of eight sealed cars advancing slowly along the tracks" (31). The exchange of bodies is complicated by the revelation that Baby Girl – one of the hostages – has contracted the disease and so it is a body rather than a person that is handed back to the family and it is Baby Girl's inability to speak, her silence, which requires our attention: "What name can you give to

something that doesn't exist yet exists for that reason precisely?" (94). In the same way, Herrera names his world and the bodies, living and dead, that inhabit it but refuses to make it fully cohere and in doing so the epidemic of death which the novel also names but obfuscates remains just out of sight; a move that I want to tie back to Herlinghaus's ethics of sobriety insofar as what we are confronted with is not a world of rational decisions and actors but a more inchoate one characterised by montage and collision – "an increasing sense of hazardous or catastrophic images, an alleged ubiquity of violence, together with unforeseen scenarios of either exhaustion or crisis" (2013: 27).

### **The Drugs Trade and the Social and Territorial Expansion of Capitalism**

If Villalobos and Herrera are keen to move the violence of the narco-economy off the page, so to speak, in order not to sensationalise it and to distance us from its effects, Winslow has no such compunction, but we should be careful about making a virtue of the former and condemning the latter. For Winslow's practice of openness and full disclosure – i.e. showing us everything – and the expansiveness of his novelistic lens (encompassing, as it does, the whole of the Americas) have a strong ethical strain too. "The accumulation of capital has always been a profoundly geographical affair", Harvey tells us (2000: 23), drawing on Luxemburg's framework whereby the "aim and incentive of capitalist production" is the pursuit of "a surplus value growing into larger quantities" so that "[e]xpansion becomes a condition of existence" (1951: 40). What *The Power of the Dog* gives us is the demystified truth of this formulation; namely that "Force is the only solution open to capital: the accumulation of capital [...] employs force as a permanent weapon" (Luxemburg 1951: 371). And so the production of dead bodies that Winslow depicts with such vim are not anathema to capitalism but should be understood as the logical realisation of its fundamental processes. In what remains of my chapter I will expand upon this point.

There are two examples from Winslow's *The Power of the Dog* that underscore the relationship between the "war on drugs" and the social and territorial expansion of capitalism. Both take place in Colombia, which is both the source of the drug business's raw material (e.g. cocaine) and the site of covert US foreign policy, partly funded by the Mexican cartels, aimed at suppressing left-wing guerrilla activities. The pretence for US involvement in Colombia may be drugs but it is in actuality "ground zero in the war against the Communist guerrillas" (492). Both examples involve Adán Barrera, described as a "young accountant" rather than a larger-than-life narco-lord – so that "[i]f you didn't know what business he was really in, you would never guess" (205). As someone who is modest, thrifty and sober, he would appear to be the model "enlightened" capitalist who is seeking to take advantage of the opening up of markets in the aftermath of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), which is described as "the essential key to Mexican modernisation" (248). NAFTA is also key to the modernisation or neoliberalisation of the drug trade because one of its effects is a "smooth flow of traffic between Mexico and the United States" and with this "a smooth flow of drug traffic" (401). As cheerleader for a new kind of cartel, Barrera is trying to reconfigure the drug business to free up entrepreneurs to enter the market as business start-ups by lowering the "taxes" he charges for services (309). In a more traditional sense, he must secure the surplus values that would otherwise be claimed by his competitors. One of his rivals is Güerro Méndez and what takes Barrera to Colombia is a meeting with the Orejuela brothers to convince them to sell their drugs to him, rather than Méndez. To be enlightened here means being compliant to the law of finance, which in the demystified world of drug trafficking where capitalism's predatory aspects are very much not abstracted, also means exercising violence in pursuit of accumulation. As such Barrera arranges to have Méndez's two children thrown from the Santa Ysabel bridge – to weaken Méndez and to underscore his own "business" prowess (295).

In a more conventional genre novel, this would be the moment in which Barrera's status as "bad" is confirmed and where our allegiances shift unequivocally to his rival, Art Keller, of the Drug Enforcement Agency, who has sworn to bring Barrera to justice for his role in the torture of another DEA agent. But alliances in Winslow's novels are transitory and if here and elsewhere Barrera is public enemy number one, he also works with the CIA to procure weapons for the Nicaraguan Contras and is a financial backer of Plan Colombia which ostensibly targets drug production but actually is intended to "'neutralise' left-wing movements across Latin America" (318). This ambivalence can be seen in the second example, where Barrera's search for a secure supply of cocaine again takes him to Colombia; this time to the Amazonian jungle of southwest Colombia and territory held by the left-wing guerrilla fighters of FARC. There, he encounters Tirofino, who asks him about his political sympathies and alleged support for the aforementioned "neutralisation" of leftist movements. Barrera's answer is not unexpected – he tells Tirofino that it was "not political" and "just business" – and in doing so he underscores capitalism's capacities for appropriating support from the state. Responding, Tirofino describes being a woodcutter in 1948 when he witnessed a right-wing militia murder all the men in his village: "Because you may say you have no politics, but the day you see your friends and family lying in the dirt, you will have politics" (410).

The exchange is so instructive not merely because of Barrera's halfhearted disavowal of the connection between politics and business but also due to the acknowledgement that the story prompts from Barrera: "There's money and the lack of money, and there's power and the lack of power. And that's all there is." To which Tirofino wryly remarks, "You're half a Marxist already" (410). What Harvey calls "the spatial fix" (2005) is one solution to the problem of over-production and over-accumulation insofar as surplus capital has to seek out new markets and territories; a process described by Streek, following Luxemburg, as "land-grabbing through market expansion" which is "accompanied by a deep transformation of social structures" (2016: 208). This is exactly what Tirofino has witnessed in his small corner of Colombia and this is what has occasioned his transformation into a left-wing guerrilla. As such, the violence that we see in the novel, especially in Colombia where "headless bodies are washed up on the shore like fish waiting to be cleaned" (491), is directly tied to what Paley calls "drug war capitalism"; not the efforts of state agencies to limit the flow of illegal narcotics across the US's southern border but the explicit convergence of state and cartel interests in order to open up "social worlds and territories once unavailable to global capitalism" (2014: 5). In the case of Tirofino and many thousands of others in Colombia and across Latin America, the violence unleashed by the US in pursuit of its hemispheric ambitions and occasioned by anxieties about perceived left-wing challenges to capitalism's hegemony, "disproportionately impacts poor working people and migrants" (Paley 2014: 34).

If Tirofino describes Barrera as "half a Marxist already" (410), the same label could also be applied to Winslow himself. As an example of crime fiction, *The Power of the Dog* operates according to a set of recognisable generic norms; i.e. whereby the narrative is structured around the long struggle between DEA agent and Mexican drug trafficker. But insofar as Keller and Barrera are also uneasy bedfellows in the "free trade" agenda unleashed by NAFTA and the attendant emergence of neoliberalism premised on "the virtues of privatisation, the free market and free trade" (Harvey 2011: 10), the political ambitions of the novel are never far from the surface. Barrera's "reinvention" of the drug trade, premised on a "horizontal" model where "a growing pool of highly motivated, richly rewarded independent businessmen [...] paid 12 percent of their gross to the Barreras and took [their] own risk, reaped [their] own rewards" (309), may be successful in one sense. As Barrera remarks, "we are building a network that is fast, efficient and entrepreneurial, using the newest and best technology and financial mechanisms" (311). But as *The Power of the Dog* and the two sequel novels – *The Cartel* (2015) and *The Border* (2019) – show us, the result is not a virtuous circle of risk-taking and

rewards but rather the freeing up of entrepreneurs to commit acts of ever more grotesque violence whose “logical end point” is the turning of living people into dead bodies or “raw materials for the work of the *sicarios*” (Biron 2012: 820). As such, the freedoms promised by the cheerleaders of neoliberalism do not bring greater prosperity to the poorest parts of the American hemisphere, e.g. south-west Colombia or Ciudad Juárez, but exactly the opposite: levels of violence and acts of creatively twisted barbarism that speak to the emergence of a new “necropolitical” order where, as Julián Cardona puts it, “some become very rich [and] most go to the trash” (see Vulliamy 2010: 130). Moreover, the US is no honest broker or virtuous bringer of rights and freedoms but rather an active participant in the violence unleashed against the poor. And it is Winslow’s understanding of this complicity which gives his novels their political significance.

### **Conclusion**

It is fair to say that Winslow’s “drug war” novels are more overtly politicised than a more typical narco-novel which might uncritically detail, and maybe even sensationalise, the violence of the key protagonists. Still, since there is an obvious affinity between the world of drugs and of capitalism – to the point where we might say that the determining characteristics of the drug trade are also the determining characteristics of the global economy: privatisation, deregulation, franchising, financialisation, de-risking and of course accumulation, which has always been what capitalism is fundamentally “about” (Streek 2016: 205) – it is not surprising that fiction about the drugs trade tells us a lot about the state of modern capitalism. And in depicting the violent dynamics of modern capitalism, they inevitably further a political argument; i.e. that there is no real distinction between crime, for example, where individuals steal and kill one another, and business, where entrepreneurs competitively chase after surplus values. In my conclusion, I want to examine two further aspects of the depiction of narcotics in crime fiction: one to do with gender and the other with transnationality. Insofar as Winslow shows the disposability of the poor, we might ask or wonder whether more could be done to depict the effects of drug war violence or the violence which accrues from narco-accumulation specifically on women. Here it is worth paying attention to the interventions by Latin American novelists like Alicia Gaspar de Alba in *Desert Blood* (2005) and Roberto Bolaño in *2666* (2004) which map “a fatal encounter of industrial maquiladora production and narco-accumulation [...] on the one hand, and “the ‘free’ labour power of migrant women (abstract labour to exploit and kill) on the other” (Kraniauskas 2016). In both novels the issue of gendered violence and exploitation is tied to Ciudad Juárez’s position on the frontline of an aggressively pursued “free trade” agenda where low-paid menial jobs for a disposable labour force are created by shifts in global finance patterns. Drugs, like money, flow smoothly and without drawing attention to themselves across borders and so it also stands to reason that fiction about the flows of drugs and money across borders will be inherently transnational in their outlook. As such, any attempt to examine the role of drugs in crime fiction must first eschew the kind of nation-centred approach to crime and crime prevention which this volume is seeking to contest. *The Power of the Dog* offers one of the most geographically expansive accounts of the drugs trade, whereby an emphasis on supply routes and networks of demands, and on the transnational affiliations and hostilities between the related domains of crime, business and politics, expose the limits of a nation-centred approach for understanding the crime novel.

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