

The Many Facets of the Diamond [24]

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The diamond engagement ring links popular culture and world politics in a surprising number of ways. In this final section, we deploy that ring – an ostensibly frivolous, and highly gendered, symbol of tradition and romance – as a springboard to highlight the intimate and complex interconnections between and among the six PCWP relationships outlined above.[\[25\]](#)

Engagement rings, even in the West, have not always featured diamonds. This ‘tradition’, and the association of diamonds with eternal love and romance, was invented in the advertising campaigns of the diamond cartel De Beers. In 1947, the famous tagline ‘A Diamond Is Forever’ (ranked top advertising slogan of the twentieth century by Ad Age in 1999) was created for De Beers. It became De Beers’ official motto in 1948 and has since accompanied all De Beers engagement ring advertising. Through this slogan, and massive advertising campaigns built upon it – notably involving radio, television and print media reports about royalty and other celebrities sporting diamond jewellery – De Beers created a popular cultural myth on the basis of which it successfully revitalised US diamond sales, which had been falling dramatically since the Great Depression (Sullivan 2013, Epstein 1982).[\[26\]](#) De Beers later effectively deployed this ‘market driving’ strategy, in which a company seeks ‘to reshape, educate and lead the consumer, or more generally, the market’ (Harris and Cai 2002, p. 173) – or, in other words, engages in economic propaganda – to transplant these Western-invented matrimonial representations and practices to Japan in the 1970s (Epstein 1982) and to China in the 1990s and beyond, where diamonds are perceived as white and thus unlucky (Harris and Cai 2002, p. 181). The diamond engagement ring, and its seemingly obvious popular cultural ‘meaning’, is the product of the global marketing practices of a major commercial cartel and an instance of cultural globalisation.

Because of the location of its raw material – the uncut diamond – this cartel, and the trade more generally, is implicated not only in global marketing but also in African politics and particularly in specific forms of African civil and international conflicts. The illicit diamond trade (sustained initially by Western and latterly by more global consumption) has been used to finance ‘rebels’ and thus to fuel war, while various African states also benefit (through taxation and other means) from the ‘licit’ diamond trade. States regulate the diamond trade in various ways, including through labour regulation, the regulation of mines’ and miners’ health and safety, and, most recently, the regulation of ‘conflict diamonds’ in/from states such as Sierra Leone, DRC, Angola, Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire (Jakobi 2013; see also UNSCR 1385 [2001]). The [Kimberley Process](#)[\[27\]](#) Certification Scheme – a joint initiative of governments, industry and civil society – established in 2003, attempts to regulate uncut diamond production and trade. Buying your ‘sweetheart’ a diamond ring or your ‘mistress’ a tennis bracelet is thus an everyday consumptive practice with world political implications involving a wide range of international actors. Whether diamond consumers consciously reflect on it or not, they are complicit in a luxury trade (which contributes to the reproduction of global economic inequalities) and also, potentially, in the unethical undercurrents of ‘blood diamonds’ (see, e.g., the Human Trafficking Movie Project n.d.).

The concept of the ‘blood diamond’, too, is part of other aspects of popular culture, having been globally popularised by the eponymous film (2006) starring Leonardo DiCaprio (himself a world political as well as a film actor, with his producer/executive producer roles on such documentaries as *The 11th Hour* [2007] and *Virunga* [2014]). *Blood Diamond* and Kanye West’s award-winning song ‘Diamonds from Sierra Leone’ (which samples Shirley Bassey’s chorus from ‘Diamonds are Forever’ – see below) drew the problem of ‘blood diamonds’ to media and public attention, while simultaneously constructing this issue in specific ways. In particular, the film reproduces the colonialist representation of Africa as relentlessly chaotic, dangerous, backward, etc. In contrast, and while simultaneously encouraging licit diamond consumption, West deliberately draws attention to the complicity of US blood diamond consumers (himself included), linking their purchases with conflict in Africa. And he goes further, connecting the violence of the blood diamond trade with the drug-fuelled, violent ‘bling’ culture of parts of urban US. Interestingly, in a striking example of intertextuality, films such as *Blood Diamond* now provide the interpretive frame used by Western news media to discuss these issues (Sharma 2012).

Intertextuality similarly defines *Diamonds are Forever*, the 1971 film, part of the globally successful Cold War 007 franchise, in which British spy James Bond simultaneously combats South African diamond smuggling and an interconnected global nuclear threat. The film’s title song, sung by Shirley Bassey, together with ‘Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend’ (from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* [1953], famously performed by Marilyn Monroe and also included in *Moulin Rouge* [2001]), and Madonna’s ‘Material Girl’, all construct – in complex ways – the diamond, and diamond jewellery, as integral to women’s identities and relationships with men. On the one hand they represent the diamond ring as a quintessential symbol of (heterosexual) romantic love and eternal attachment. On the other, however, women gain financial security from their expensive jewellery and sometimes have a more reliable relationship with the trustworthy jewel(lery) (Capon 2013). In some contexts (and contra the ‘eternal love’ trope), the diamond engagement ring offered, or was thought to offer, a financial surety for women who had consented to sex before marriage with their fiancés and were subsequently jilted (O’Brien 2012).

Finally, the diamond (and jewellery more generally) regularly appears in state diplomacy, perhaps most notably in the UK. The famous Indian Koh-i-Noor diamond, presented to Queen Victoria in 1850 (as a spoil of war), was set into the British Crown Jewels in 1937 (Nelson 2010, Tweedie 2010, see also [The British Monarchy](#) website.)^[28] This diamond (and others in the Crown’s possession) remains contentious symbols of British colonialism and exploitation. India recently demanded, again, that it be returned; UK Prime Minister David Cameron again refused (Groves 2010, BBC 2010). Queen Elizabeth II is regularly gifted with diamonds and other precious stones and jewellery, some of which, when the Queen functions as ‘the personification and symbol of Britain to the outside world’ (Jay 1992, p. 81), are deliberately redeployed as/in public diplomacy. When the Queen visits New Zealand, for example, she wears the diamond fern brooch given to her by ‘the women of Auckland’ on her first tour of New Zealand in 1953 (Tapaleao 2014); it was similarly worn, more recently, by the Duchess of Cambridge (English 2014). While these particular diamonds do not represent romance, they do represent state identities and the undying allegiance of the New Zealand ‘people’ to the British Commonwealth and monarchy (classic international relations to which popular culture ostensibly does not relate).

The diamond engagement ring – which looks at first glance to be a minor popular culture artefact ‘about’ romance – thus turns out to be intimately and complexly intertwined with a multitude of (themselves interconnected) world political actors, processes, practices, meanings and flows.

Notes

[24] For a well-developed conceptualisation of ‘facets’ and research methodology, see Mason (2011).

[25] We recognise that our construction of this example privileges world politics over popular culture by forcing the diamond ring to prove its relevance to the latter, thus reproducing the privileging of WP over PC that we challenge in this article.

[26] During this early advertising campaign, Queen Elizabeth II – who makes another diamond-studded appearance below – visited several South African diamond mines and ‘accepted a diamond from [Harry] Oppenheimer’, Chairman of De Beers, thus adding another overtly world politics dimension (Epstein 1982).

[27] Kimberley Process, (n.d.) ‘The Kimberley Process (KP)’, <<http://www.kimberleyprocess.com>>.

[28] The official website of the British Monarchy, ‘The Crown Jewels’, <<http://www.royal.gov.uk/the%20royal%20collection%20and%20other%20collections/thecrownjewels/overview.aspx>>.