

America's ugly face

The Insider, directed by Michael Mann, written by Mann and Eric Roth

By David Walsh
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There is a remarkable moment toward the end of Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957). Robert Stack, a millionaire-playboy who destroys everything around him, staggers out of the family mansion, mortally wounded, and mutters to himself, more or less, "How did I end up like this?" Unhappily, he never asked himself that until it was too late.

This happens a good deal in America. Many people go about their daily lives, ignoring all the warning signs, until disaster strikes, and then they say: "My god, I thought everything was fine!" So many false explanations abound, so many ways of avoiding the obvious.

Another possible way of dealing with the state of things, although not so popular at present, is to look at it directly and honestly. Michael Mann (writer-director) and Eric Roth (writer) have done that in *The Insider* with remarkable results.

Their story is about the American tobacco industry and its efforts to suppress a segment prepared for CBS television network's "60 Minutes" in 1995. The "60 Minutes" story, produced by Lowell Bergman and presented by veteran newsman Mike Wallace, alleged that tobacco companies had long known of the disease-causing effects of smoking, were well aware that nicotine was an addictive drug and indeed deliberately enhanced the effect of nicotine through the use of chemical additives.

The star witness in the segment was Dr. Jeffrey Wigand, a former corporate vice-president and head of research and development at tobacco giant Brown & Williamson. Wigand accused Brown & Williamson Chief Executive Officer Thomas Sandefur of perjuring himself before Congress when he stated, "I believe that nicotine is not addictive." Wigand observed that those in the tobacco industry considered themselves in the "nicotine delivery business."

In Mann's film, Bergman (Al Pacino) first encounters Wigand (Russell Crowe), recently fired by Brown & Williamson, while looking for a consultant on a story concerning the fire hazards of smoking. Bergman senses that Wigand has a significant story to tell. But the latter has signed a confidentiality agreement with his former employer; if he tells "60 Minutes" what he knows, he'll lose his severance package, including

medical coverage, a major issue in the US. He comes under immense pressure to remain silent; his family receives death threats; his marriage eventually breaks up; Brown & Williamson launches a smear campaign.

To get Wigand's evidence on the public record, Bergman arranges for him to testify in Mississippi, where the state government is suing the tobacco companies for the cost of cigarette-related health care. Defying a gag order and the threat of worse, Wigand appears. The tobacco firms have the testimony sealed.

Meanwhile CBS executives become increasingly nervous about the story. Brown & Williamson promises to sue for "tortious interference," i.e., on the grounds that CBS is encouraging Wigand to break his agreement to remain silent. Network lawyers put pressure on Wallace and "60 Minutes" executive producer Don Hewitt. They cave in. Bergman has to inform Wigand, who's sacrificed a great deal, that the story won't run. He's devastated.

In the end, Bergman leaks the story to the press. Taken to task by editorialists and with elements of the story already having appeared in the news media, "60 Minutes" airs its original story. Bergman quits anyway: "What got broken here won't go back together again."

Crowe is especially fine. Pacino proves that his over-acting and histrionics in too many films have been largely a product of having weak material to work with. If the cinema of the past twenty years had provided greater opportunity for sensitive characterization, Christopher Plummer (Mike Wallace) would be more widely recognized for the extraordinary actor he is.

The Insider has many positive aspects. The film maintains a high level of tension. It treats its subjects as human beings, not as monsters or icons. When Wallace defends himself to Bergman, "I won't spend the rest of my days working in the wilderness of national public radio," one believes him. There are many accurate touches. Wigand comes across as a thoroughly admirable, courageous figure.

I have the nagging suspicion, however, that if the film were to be judged solely on the level of its drama as such, it would not rate that much higher than the average studio production.

Something else is at work here.

Mann is a contradictory figure. Born in Chicago in 1943, he studied at film school in London and lived in Europe for a time. He began his career in the mid-1970s, writing for television shows such as *Starsky and Hutch*. He directed his first film for television, *Jericho Mile*, a prison drama with Peter Strauss, in 1979. His first theatrical release, *Thief* (1981), starred James Caan. Mann is still probably most closely identified as the creator and producer of the successful 1980s television series *Miami Vice*. He returned to feature filmmaking in 1992 with *The Last of the Mohicans* and directed *Heat*, with Pacino and Robert De Niro, in 1995.

One might have had the right until now to characterize much of Mann's work—including, above all, *Miami Vice*, despite its occasional exposés of the rich and famous—as a triumph of style, of a sort, and self-consciousness over substance. His heroes in particular have tended to be a bit too cool and controlled (and in control) for their or anyone else's good.

And I don't know that Mann's weaknesses as an artist have entirely disappeared in *The Insider*. If one went looking one might find them, or echoes of them. A certain slickness makes itself felt at moments.

Nor would I suggest that Mann has undergone an ideological conversion. I really don't know. He has probably long harbored oppositional or quasi-oppositional sentiments. What's interesting to consider is the combination of circumstances that pushes certain sorts of concerns into the foreground and others into the background. In each particular case it takes the form of an accident. Mann knew Bergman—a 60s' radical and one-time writer at *Ramparts* magazine—and apparently felt personally impelled to dramatize the events. He may not see anything more in it than that. But when the “accidents” begin to add up and one observes a certain trend, one is entitled to generalize.

The most remarkable feature of the film is the hostility it expresses, and encourages in a spectator, for the profit system. The depth and purity of this hostility is breathtaking. It is the depth and purity of this hostility that provides the film with its aesthetic. This, I think, is what one responds to more than anything else.

The filmmakers present the heads of the tobacco companies, the “Seven Dwarves” (whose oath-taking before Congress, in which they bear some resemblance to the defendants at the Nuremberg war crimes trial, is shown a number of times), as thoroughly despicable, irredeemable characters. They carry on their businesses with the full knowledge that their product kills or damages millions of human beings. Wigand's former employer is prepared to go to any lengths to protect its interests.

One might say: well, these are the tobacco companies, renowned for their indifference to human suffering. Is the spectator likely to make such fine and, moreover, unjustified distinctions? Is anyone who thinks about the matter for more than a moment likely to delude him or herself that those

operating the automobile companies, banks, or insurance firms are made of qualitatively different stuff? The ugly face of Brown & Williamson *is* the ugly face of big business in America. Mann is only confirming what everyone already knows in his or her heart. It's not discussed in polite company, no one in the corporate-controlled media will mention it, but everyone knows it.

Of course, “radical” blockheads will point out that the filmmakers display confidence in the government of the State of Mississippi, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and so on. Is this the heart of the film, is this what the spectator will bring away with him or her—the notion that one should rely on these institutions? I hardly think so. What the film makes plain, without anyone involved in its production probably having wanted to do so, is *how widely hated* capitalism is in America. And why not? Who's more intimately familiar with its workings than the American population? Of course only a small number are *consciously aware* of how much they distrust and despise the present social system and have thought out its implications.

According to Lowell Bergman, in an interview he gave to *Salon*, CBS lawyers said, when they gave him permission to work on the film, “to paraphrase them—‘Have fun working on the movie. We know it's a very complicated story where there's no death or violence, so it's unlikely ever to be made.’” This simply shows how stupid and out of touch such people are. Mann and Roth did a remarkable job of organizing their material into a coherent shape, but an element in their ability to carry out their work had to be the knowledge or the intuition that a large and receptive audience existed for such a story, which is not, after all, so terribly “complicated.”

The Insider could only come into being, could only possess its power, because it tapped into an accumulated build-up of disgust and anger, a general feeling that “enough is enough.” Vast numbers of people are sick and tired of a society in which everything is organized in the interest of the rich and powerful. That's what the film's about, whether anyone likes it or not.

I'm entirely in favor of *The Insider* and the blows it delivers. It is quite significant that denouncing those at the top is once again becoming popular. Such attitudes are contagious and are bound to spread. The film is an antidote to all the rubbish spread about by the media, all the ways in which the representatives of the powers-that-be try to shift the blame for the present crisis onto the misdeeds of the population itself. Mann's film points a finger in the opposite direction and says, that's where the problem lies, that's the real source of the misery. Such a work can only have a positive impact.

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