

Not enough information: The Informant! directed by Steven Soderbergh

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11 November 2009

The Informant! is the latest film from director Steven Soderbergh, the once independent filmmaker who is today best known as the director of the *Oceans 11* film franchise. The latest work is based on the true story of a case of massive US corporate corruption in the 1990s.

The Informant! reunites Soderbergh with actor Matt Damon, who appeared in all three *Oceans* films. Damon portrays Mark Whitacre, the real-life corporate whistleblower at the center of an FBI investigation into price fixing by the Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) food-processing conglomerate during the 1990s. Whitacre first came to the attention of the FBI after he alleged that the executive of a Japanese company had placed a saboteur in an ADM plant and had introduced a foodborne virus during processing. He claimed the executive was attempting to extort ADM for millions of dollars.

The FBI quickly discovered Whitacre had fabricated the story in an effort to injure his superiors, but when Whitacre revealed that executives of ADM and other companies were engaged in a global price-fixing conspiracy, the FBI pressured Whitacre to become a confidential informant. He would be made to wear a wire and record internal meetings between executives of several companies. The investigation eventually included the use of hidden cameras and videotape.

The film follows Damon's Whitacre as he stumbles his way through the investigation, incompetent but somewhat full of himself, describing all of his undercover adventures as like "something out of a [Michael] Crichton novel." As the Feds build their case against ADM and the investigation comes to a head, it becomes increasingly clear that Whitacre has continued deceiving them. Their informant has been embezzling money right under their noses.

The Informant! is a missed opportunity. In the years

since the ADM scandal of the 1990s, the calamities caused by the subversion of the food resources of masses of people to the private profit interests of a few has reached new heights. Within the past two years, the United States has seen the largest recall of beef in the country's history, in 2008, and major recalls of peanut butter tainted by salmonella. One has only to go back a few years more to recall the 2006 contamination of spinach supplies by the E. coli bacteria. Food contamination and recalls come one after another. Each case brings with it hundreds of cases of sickness and dozens of deaths.

A serious consideration of the criminal activities carried out by the executives of ADM and their cohorts in the food industry would have been valuable in this light, and there would have been plenty of drama (and humor) to go around. Soderbergh is simply not up to the task. This is a film far more interested in the personality of Mark Whitacre, his eccentricities, his peculiar ability to deceive and more. Whitacre, like so many subjects in Hollywood period pieces today, becomes another oddball individual who is a mystery in his time. The film seems only to be saying: *Here was a character!*

Whitacre lies constantly and compulsively, refusing to stop even when he has been exposed. He comes from a modest background but fabricates a past in which he claims to be an orphan who was adopted by wealthy parents. In voice-over, he explains to viewers that it's a much more sympathetic story. Hardly anything Whitacre says to anyone is true, or completely true. He is always looking for an edge. He believes that if he brings down the company's leadership, he'll be the only one left who can run it. His pursuit of power and money is desperate and self-destructive, often delusional.

What of it? Who is this man? Where does he come from? Under what conditions does someone like that emerge? Whitacre served eight and a half years in federal prison for fraud and tax evasion in the aftermath of the ADM scandals. Since his release, he has become the chief operating officer of biotechnology firm Cypress Systems, Inc. How was it possible for someone of Whitacre's type to find himself once again in such a powerful position? Soderbergh looks down his nose at Whitacre, and nearly everyone else in the film.

One can't look to *The Informant!* for answers. Steven Soderbergh has managed to make a film about the corporate culture of the 1990s while saying virtually nothing insightful about any of it. It would be more accurate to say he has made a film "set against the backdrop" of corporate culture in the 1990s. This film makes the director's earlier film about corporate crime, the lukewarm *Erin Brockovich* (2000), look strong by comparison.

It feels, once again, as though Soderbergh is treading water and showing off at the same time. The filmmaker has now poked fun at, and demonstrated his intellectual superiority to, a whole range of human subjects, engaged in a variety of fields. When will he tell us something meaningful and important about his characters? When will he act as though he deeply cares about them?

The actual story of the price-fixing conspiracy carried out by the ADM leadership is thrust far into the background of *The Informant!* It was a remarkable case involving a conspiracy between corporations in the US, Japan and Korea to hike the prices on lysine, a food additive being synthesized by ADM. Three leading executives at ADM were sent to federal prison for the crime and the company was fined \$100 million, making it the single largest antitrust fine leveled against a US corporation in history up to that point.

The film makes the point, near its conclusion, that Whitacre was sentenced to a far longer term in prison than the executives of ADM who were engaged in much greater crimes. In fact, this is true. The focus of the investigation was turned onto Whitacre once his embezzling came to light. And yet, one might say that the film itself also focuses disproportionately on the exploits of Mark Whitacre when it should have other things on its mind.

Much of the film consists of jokes at Whitacre's expense as he fumbles his way through the investigation, looking directly into hidden cameras, narrating his every step into the listening device hidden under his shirt. There are also the exasperated reactions of the team of FBI agents growing increasingly frustrated with Whitacre's antics. So many essentials have simply been ignored. The decision to give the work a "light comedy" treatment, its scoffing approach (underscored by the exclamation point in the title), was perhaps also not the wisest artistic choice.

The Informant! is yet another disappointing work from Soderbergh. The filmmaker did some interesting work early in his career. One should not overrate them, but some of his films, including *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989) and *Schizopolis* (1996), had something to them. Since then, he has gone back and forth between making big budget Hollywood films and smaller "art films." In both cases, there are diminishing returns. Whatever Soderbergh had going for him early on, unhappily, has weakened considerably.

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