

# Study Guide

## The Informant



Feature movies are a medium, an art and a business. Each of these elements plays a role. As a medium, movies represent ideas through the codes and conventions of sound and moving image. As art, they make personal and cultural statements to their audiences. As businesses, they create work for their creators and profits for their investors and distributors.

This guide, which extends the ideas presented in *The Informant* episode of *Beyond the Screen*, may be used by teachers as they support their students, by parents who want to discuss the movie with their children, or by serious viewers who want to think beyond the screen.

**Plot Synopsis:** A senior executive at a major US food company voluntarily collects price-fixing evidence while working covertly for the FBI. The stress and lack of psychological support during the years of undercover spying bring out some very quirky personality traits.

### A. Music

Soundtrack music is an important feature of most movies. Music is carefully selected or composed to set the mood and support the feelings of scenes, whether they are exciting, romantic, or silly. Movie music is most often subliminal, or hardly noticed, as it supports the action and dialogue.

Award-winning composer Marvin Hamlisch used music very purposefully in *The Informant*. His music included a variety of popular genres, including secret agent, polka, bluegrass, big band, and game show. The music was frequently used at the beginning of new scenes, but also played through and over dialogue.

Does the music playing over dialogue suggest that the dialogue was unimportant, and suggests that the music communicates the main message of the scene?

Might viewers find the music a distraction, or will they understand that it is important to the tone and mood of each scene?

Does the music, e.g., hoedown bluegrass music during Whitacre's lie detector test, match the scene's mood, or provide a contrast or counterpoint to the mood? How does the music support the comedic nature of the movie?

### B. Sound

Sound editing, especially of dialogue, plays a very important role in *The Informant*. Viewers frequently hear Mark Whitacre's voice speaking over actions and dialogue. The voice-overs are non-sequiters, or statements disconnected from the subjects of the scenes.

1. During crucial meetings between Whitacre and the FBI agents, or between Whitacre and the heads of other lysine-producing corporations, viewers hear Mr. Whitacre talk about tie patterns, wool on skin, quarts versus litres, and other seemingly random thoughts.

What meaning do you think viewers might take from these non-sequitor voice-overs? What impressions of Whitacre might viewers get?

2. During one of his last conversations with FBI agent Brian Sheppard, viewers hear Whitacre's voice forming responses in his head immediately before he voices them. These voice-overs are not the non-sequiturs viewers have heard previously, but relevant statements heard just before he says them. Viewers hear them, then see Whitacre say them to Shepard—excepting the last statement. Agent Shepard asks Whitacre, “Why are you lying?” Whitacre's voice-over immediately responds, “I don't know.” But instead of saying “I don't know.” aloud, as he has the other responses, Whitacre states, “I think it's time I went back to the hospital.”

Why do you think Whitacre lied so often to so many people?

Do you think he really didn't know why he lied?

What might his desire to go to the hospital tell viewers about his compulsive lying?

## C. Cinematography

Just as the music and sound are placed purposefully in *The Informant*, the cinematic representations also change according to the mood and setting. Business meetings with foreign executives and domestic scenes in Decatur have a very different look than hotel room and parking lot meetings with FBI agents. The light in the business meetings and home is bright, and people are easy to see. The light in the hotel rooms and parking lots is often dim and sometimes behind Whitacre, making it hard to see him clearly.

How might these differences in lighting influence the way that viewers feel when watching the scenes?

Does some of the cinematography have a documentary feeling?

Might that documentary feeling make viewers feel like they are eavesdropping on clandestine conversations?

There is much camera movement in *The Informant*, especially when Whitacre is entering a new city or office building. The camera often stops, however, when the conversations begin.

How might the alternations between moving camera at the beginning of the scenes and stationary camera during the conversations influence viewers' responses to Whitacre's adventures?

## D. Casting

1. Steven Soderbergh purposefully cast several comedians in key roles: Tom Papa (Mick Andreas, senior partner), Tom Wilson (Mark Cheviron, ADM security), Rick Overton (Terry Wilson, president of the ADM corn division), Tony Hale (attorney Epstein), Patton Oswalt (FBI Agent Herbst), Paul F. Tompkins (FBI Agent D'Angelo), Tom Smothers (Dwayne Andreas, ADM chair) and Dick Smothers (Judge Harold Baker). While he cast comedians in these roles, he did not direct them to play their roles as comedic.

Do you think these casting choices contribute to the comedic quality of *The Informant*?

Should the actors have been directed to be funnier?

How might over-the-top performances by these comedians have changed the movie experience?

2. Matt Damon has acted in comedies (*Ocean's 11, 12, 13*), action (*The Bourne Ultimatum, The Bourne Supremacy*) and dramas (*The Departed*).

How does Mr. Damon successfully communicate the humour of Mark Whitacre's actions and speech in *The Informant*?

How does he use his action and drama experience to communicate Mark Whitacre's action and drama?

Do you think Mr. Damon should have played Whitacre's character differently, e.g. sillier, less silly, more dramatically?

## E. Costume Design

Media construct reality, but so do people. Mark Whitacre wore a wig during his years at ADM. He chose his clothing, especially his ties, very carefully. The Informant's costume designer created costumes that would support Whitacre's character. Note Whitacre's clothes, and especially his ties.

How are they different from others' clothing in the ADM office?

How are they different from the FBI agents' clothing?

Did you notice that Matt Damon was wearing a wig?

What might the clothes and wig tell viewers about Whitacre's character?

Note Ginger's (Whitacre's wife) clothing and hair styling. How do they support her innocence and straightforward worldview?

## F. Delusions

'We are all just prisoners here, of our own device.' The Eagles, Hotel California

1. Delusions are unfounded, illogical, or irrational beliefs. They are often self-imposed, i.e., created and believed by the originator of the beliefs, rather than created and imposed by someone else.

How does *The Informant* use codes and conventions of cinematography, music, voice, editing, to help viewers consider the following questions:

Was Mark Whitacre delusional?

Was Mark Whitacre a victim or a perpetrator?

Did the FBI take unfair advantage of him by asking him to work undercover for years without training or psychological support?

Was Mr. Whitacre a victim of the morality and actions he saw in movies about vigilantes and corporate snitches, e.g., *The Firm*?

Was Mr. Whitacre delusional, i.e., did he suffer from a psychological condition in which he fantasized that his actions—even those that were outrageous, illogical or illegal—were reasonable or morally justified?

2. *The Informant* is based on a novel that retells a true story. The real Mark Whitacre has served his time in prison, been released, and has rejoined his family. He is gainfully employed as a senior executive.

How might *The Informant* influence Mr. Whitacre's personal and professional life?

How do you think his friends might respond to seeing *The Informant*?

How might his family (wife, son, parents) respond to seeing *The Informant*?

How might seeing *The Informant* influence Mr. Whitacre's co-workers and clients?

How difficult might it be for Mr. Whitacre to see *The Informant*?

How would YOU respond if you saw your illogical actions and serial lies presented in a feature movie?

## G. Telltale Analogies?

While some of Whitacre's internal voices may sound like random thoughts, others might provide viewers with useful insights into his character. How might the following thoughts—seemingly random—help viewers understand some of Whitacre's actions or feelings?

1. 'There are harmless butterflies in South America whose wings copy the colours and patterns of butterflies whose wings are lethal to birds of prey.'
2. 'Polar bears hide their noses during hunting because seals can recognize them if they see their black noses on their white faces.'
3. 'There should be a TV show about a guy who calls home one day and he's there. He answers... only it's someone else. He's somehow divided into two...'

## H. Delusions

"Intertextuality" occurs when one text references another text. Creators use intertextuality because it can communicate much information in a short time, and it can add complexity and interest. Hip hop music uses intertextuality when artists loop a portion of another artist's song, then rap to it. People can also use intertextuality in their everyday conversations, e.g., 'Beam me up, Scotty,' 'Is that your final answer,' 'Yes we can!' or 'I'd like to buy a vowel, Pat.'

At one point, we see Whitacre watching Tom Cruise in *The Firm*, a movie based on a John Grisham novel. Later, he mentions that his predicament is the same as that of Mitch, the main character in *The Firm*. *The Firm* is the story of a rookie lawyer who innocently joins a law firm that is fronting for organized crime. By the time Mitch discovers the truth of his situation, he is trapped in a predicament of threats and complicity. He cleverly dismantles the law firm, making it impossible for the criminals to use it, while simultaneously embezzling money to fund his exit.

How might viewers who have prior knowledge of *The Firm*'s characters and plot understand why Whitacre behaves strangely in some circumstances, e.g., embezzling money from ADM while under FBI surveillance?

## I. Movies and Politics

*Blood Diamond* is a feature movie that describes the complicity of major diamond companies in the support of cruel and unjust African regimes. *Body of Lies* is a feature movie that describes the complicity of American government agencies in the manipulation of Middle East politics. These movies have had impact beyond the box office because the issues they raise have entered public discourse and influenced foreign policy.

Is *The Informant* an equally-important movie?

Is *The Informant* a movie that everyone should see, so that consumers and governments will be vigilant and aggressive when there are possibilities of price-fixing among major corporations?

Might *The Informant* influence the investigations of multinational industries to explore the possibility of price-fixing?

What other industries would you suggest should be investigated?

For more information on *The Informant*, visit [www.theinformantmovie.warnerbros.com](http://www.theinformantmovie.warnerbros.com)

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