

SCHIZOANALYZING THE INFORMANT

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All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. . . . Words group themselves automatically into the familiar dreary pattern . . . and every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain."

—George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

The protagonist of *The Informant!* (2009) would be a tough nut for a psychoanalyst to crack. Psychoanalysis explores the past, probing memories, dreams, and parapraxes for clues to the character, attributes, and modus operandi of a person's mind. But as portrayed in Steven Soderbergh's fact-based dramatic comedy, corporate wheeler-dealer Mark Whitacre is a person without a past. More precisely, he is a person who has endeavored to erase his past—his childhood, adolescence, and family history—by lying about it to others and refraining from thinking about it himself, as we gather from samples of his everyday thoughts, heard as voiceovers on the soundtrack. Perhaps he is in denial, blocking out a past too painful or heartrending to bear remembering. Or perhaps he has a mental illness that prevents him from assembling the pieces of his past into a coherent internal pattern. Or perhaps he is carrying out a plan to conceal his nature from those around him and has developed the habit of hiding aspects of himself *from* himself lest they somehow glimmer through and give his game away. Whatever its causes, Mark's duplicity is heroic in its proportions. Its full extent doesn't become apparent until long into the story, when we realize that what appeared to be a long string of deceptions is actually an *endless* string of deceptions, turning the very idea of truth into a chimera as ungraspable by Mark as by the colleagues, authorities, and relatives he has gulled.

The proximate cause of all this mendacity is old-fashioned greed. Mark has been stealing large amounts of money from Archer Daniels Midland, the company he works for, and prevaricating to cover up the crimes. But the intricacy and extensiveness of his fabrications suggest that deceit has taken on its own momentum, becoming a *raison d'être* rather than a necessary evil. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that Mark lies to his allies as freely as to his adversaries—his loyal wife, Ginger, is almost as hoodwinked as his corporate superiors—and he continues to withhold information even when revealing all is unquestionably in his best interest. Further confusion comes from his frequent assertions, when caught in a fabrication or when he simply feels like saying it, that *this* time he's *really* telling the whole truth. Which is, of course, another lie. It's clear that Mark is bamboozling himself as thoroughly as he's deceiving all the others, but he's perfectly contented on that score, since "reality" is for him an arbitrary construct with little more ontological weight than the protean fictions he devises. In the final scene, Bob Herndon, a sympathetic agent from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, visits Mark in prison and asks him to *finally* tell how much money he has stolen and embezzled over the years. Mark modestly throws the question back to Bob, who has been by turns his friend, his dupe, his confidant, and his nemesis throughout his roller-coaster journey from corporate star to hapless jailbird. "I don't know, Bob," he says in the last spoken words of the film. "You tell *me*."

Thought Experiments

In sum, the informant and *The Informant!* are epistemological puzzles, as tantalizing and slippery as any that Soderbergh has given us, even in films that appear considerably more complex on first viewing. They are philosophical puzzles, though—the kind that ask not to be definitively solved but to be embraced, experienced, and ruminated on as we do with any conceptual conundrum that seizes our imagination. And of course they are puzzles that Soderbergh himself wants to investigate, which is why he made this movie. In a perceptive essay on Soderbergh's work, critic A. O. Scott contends that he seems "to approach each film as a problem, a hypothesis to be explored and tested in the course of production." Scott groups *The Informant!* with Soderbergh's two previous films, *Che* (2008) and *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009), as a triptych focusing on "fundamentally unknowable" characters whose "motives, feelings and inner lives remain just out of reach."¹ This

helps to explain the tension in many Soderbergh films between characters as emotionally rich human beings on one hand and as embodied abstractions on the other. To my mind, Javier Rodriguez in *Traffic* (2000) and Chris Kelvin in *Solaris* (2002) fit the former category, the eponymous protagonist in *Kafka* (1991) and Wilson in *The Limey* (1999) fit the latter, and Graham Dalton in *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) falls between them. One of the things that make *The Informant!* exhilarating is Mark Whitacre's ability to span the whole spectrum, capturing our affection even as he knocks himself out being as abstract and depthless as possible. It's quite a feat.

As cinematic thought experiments, Soderbergh's films reflect his curiosity about specific properties of contemporary film production, post-modernist aesthetics, and the sociopolitical milieus that shape both the experiments themselves and whatever tentative results they may achieve. Yet while such clearly ambitious pictures as *Traffic*, *Solaris*, and *Che* place their cultural aspirations into the foreground, *The Informant!* presents itself as light entertainment, complete with witty dialogue, perky music by hit-maker Marvin Hamlisch, and superstar Matt Damon in the leading role. For moviegoers who don't see much humor in the fact-based craziness and criminality depicted by the film, its buoyant tone can seem miscalculated and even troubling. One such viewer is critic Lisa Schwarzbaum, who wrote in *Entertainment Weekly* that Soderbergh applies "a greasy veneer of mirth over what is, no joke, a serious mess of malfeasance and mental instability." Another is Hiram Lee of the *World Socialist Web Site*, who noted that in the years between the ADM scandal and the release of Soderbergh's film, "the calamities caused by the subversion of the food resources of masses of people [to benefit the] private profit interests of a few has reached new heights." A serious consideration of ADM's criminal activities would have been welcome, Lee continues, but Soderbergh's film "focuses disproportionately on the exploits of Mark Whitacre when it should have other things on its mind," just as the actual ADM trial resulted in Whitacre receiving a much longer prison term than did higher executives who had committed much greater crimes, presumably because his "eccentricities" and "peculiar ability to deceive" made him especially fascinating to the investigators and prosecutors who were calling the shots. "So many essentials," Lee concludes, "have simply been ignored."²

These critics make valid points, but *The Informant!* is a more interesting and important film when viewed less as a corporate caper movie—a sort of *Ocean's Fourteen* blended with fact-based dramedies like Steven Spielberg's

Catch Me If You Can (2002) and Robert Mulligan's *The Great Imposter* (1961)—than as a philosophical investigation of, among other things, the ethical dimensions of everyday living in a world pervaded by the amorality of modern business. The film tacitly invokes the Socratic concept of the unexamined life, tracing intimate links between the unexamined personal-private life and the unexamined group-corporate life, both of which can seem very much worth living in a culture that equates material wealth with success, fulfillment, and happiness.³ From this perspective, the film's smooth surfaces and manic moods do not counter but *embody* and *convey* the ideas that led Soderbergh to undertake this story. All of its chief elements, from Mark's eccentric personality and escalating deceit to the company's illegal practices and the justice system's ongoing confusion, are colored and critiqued by the ironic implications of Soderbergh's seamless vernacular filmmaking, which portrays them simultaneously as grist for absurdist comedy and signifiers of terminal decay in a self-obsessed society. With a few adjustments Soderbergh could have made Mark a truly dangerous figure—a Gordon Gekko of biochemistry, a Tony Soprano of price fixing—but Soderbergh doesn't create flat-out villains very often, subscribing instead to the statement by Octave in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939), "The awful thing about life is this: Everyone has his reasons."

Mark Whitacre, Crypto-filmmaker

The exploits of Mark Whitacre are drawn from the pages of Kurt Eichenwald's best-selling book *The Informant: A True Story*, published in 2000.⁴ In the film as in life, Whitacre is a biochemist who took a job in the early 1990s with ADM, a huge agribusiness company with headquarters in Decatur, Illinois, squarely in the American grain belt. Every day, according to ADM's Web site, its twenty-eight thousand employees "transform crops such as corn, oilseeds, wheat and cocoa into food ingredients, animal feeds, and agriculturally derived fuels and chemicals." Also on the Web site is a declaration of "The ADM Way" which asserts the company's wish to uphold "the highest standards of integrity and ethical behavior in everything we do and say."⁵

Mark came to ADM as a scientist, but as the film begins he is also a major player in the company's business area, building up its bioproducts division and supervising the production of lysine, an additive derived from corn starch and used in any number of ways by food processors around the globe. He describes his work in the movie's first voiceover: "Archer Daniels

Midland. Most people have never heard of us. But chances are they've never had a meal we're not part of. Just read the side of the package. That's us. Now ADM is taking the dextrose from the corn and turning it into an amino acid called lysine. It's all very scientific. If you're a stockholder, all that matters is [that] corn goes in one end and profit comes out the other. We've got the largest lysine plant in the world here. That's where I come in." These words introduce Mark as a character and as a mindset, or rather a changing array of mindsets. The paragraph begins like an advertising pitch for ADM, shifts into scientific discourse, shifts again into a blunt statement of the firm's reason for being—making money—and ends on an autobiographical note. Mark looks like a commonplace businessman, but this breezy interior monologue suggests that an unusual sensibility accompanies his bland appearance.

Something similar can be said about ADM and its lofty ethical claim, which comes into question almost immediately. The lysine operation has fallen behind on its production schedule because a virus has infected the dextrose stocks. One day Mark approaches Mick Andreas, a top executive and son of ADM patriarch Dwayne Andreas, saying that surreptitious phone calls from an executive at Ajinomoto, a Japanese competitor, have revealed that an Ajinomoto saboteur is responsible for the virus and that for \$10 million Ajinomoto will give ADM a new lysine "bug" that is immune. Andreas might respond to these disclosures with righteous outrage, but instead he instructs Mark to talk down Ajinomoto's price.

The story takes a decisive turn when ADM executives inform Mark that they've called in the FBI to investigate the situation. Mark seems oddly agitated by this news, but agrees to have a recording device placed on his private ADM phone line at home. Soon thereafter, FBI agent Brian Shepard arrives at his house to install the tap. As the agent is leaving, Ginger Whitacre suddenly insists to her husband that he must "say something" to Shepard, and that if he refuses, she herself will make some sort of declaration. Mark reluctantly takes Shepard aside and reveals that he hasn't been entirely forthcoming about the Ajinomoto calls. In fact, he says, his statements to the FBI were scripted by his ADM superiors, who are covering up a far greater scandal—a multinational price-fixing conspiracy of which ADM has been a prime mover and chief beneficiary. Shepard immediately recruits Mark as an informant against the company, and Mark jumps into the role with gee-whiz enthusiasm. Before long he is wearing a wire to international meetings, facilitating FBI surveillance of executive collusion, and carrying on like a veteran undercover operative. He is also lying to virtually everyone

who crosses his path, about everything from phone calls and kickbacks to illegal bonuses and Swiss bank accounts.

Deceptions, equivocations, concealments, and evasions thus become the film's main leitmotifs, beating out a narrative rhythm that rarely lets up. Mark isn't responsible for all of the misbehavior, to be sure. ADM is indeed conspiring with Japanese and South Korean competitors to fix the amounts of lysine each will produce and the prices they will demand—offenses that are taken very seriously by antitrust prosecutors in the United States, where the artificially inflated market is having a heavy impact on suppliers and consumers; as Shepard puts it, “a pound of bacon, a peanut butter sandwich, some vitamins—anything that ADM has a hand in—it's all fixed. . . . Basically, everyone in the country is the victim of corporate crime by the time they finish breakfast.” But in Mark's hands, this deep well of malfeasance becomes simply a handy tool. With information about ADM's crimes at his disposal, he uses it to mask his own embezzling, dupe the FBI and (eventually) the U.S. Department of Justice, and propel his exciting activities as an inside man for the feds. In important ways, Mark is something of an artist, and more specifically he's a filmmaker, guiding video shoots and recording sounds that ultimately come together as a sort of crypto-movie, seen in bits and pieces by investigators and prosecutors as they gather evidence for their case. With his predilection for reflexive stories and postmodern structures, Soderbergh surely had this consciously or unconsciously in mind when he decided to tell Mark's story.

The Corporation as Psychopath

Seeing a certain artistic creativity in Mark's behavior does not preclude the possibility that his habitual lying might result from a mental disorder, as I suggested earlier. But while he consults with psychiatrists for therapeutic and tactical reasons, his machinations and motivations are so byzantine that the experts accomplish little beyond labeling him with a diagnosis (bipolar disorder) that names his idiosyncrasies without illuminating them. Given the uncertainties of current psychological paradigms—psychoanalytic, cognitive, behavioral, neurobiological, existential, or humanistic—it is hardly surprising that Mark's therapists lose their bearings, relying as they do on such commonsense notions as the legibility of language, the cohesiveness of memory, and the efficacy of cognition as a link between embodied subject and external world. Mark flummoxes all this by supercharging “reality”

with fantasies and falsehoods, presenting the mishmash so persuasively that even his closest companions are taken in. Although the textbook term *sociopath* doesn't begin to capture his complexity, it's true that with him the social and the pathological constitute a single entity: the high-functioning manipulator who lies, cheats, and steals because his personal logic *and* the logic of capitalism so demand. His delusions are all the more pernicious for being hard to spot.

We must keep in mind, however, that those delusions are not entirely delusional and that psychiatry and its variants may be poorly equipped to fathom them. As farfetched and ill fated as Mark's plans and schemes ultimately prove to be, they are basically antic variations on abiding themes of American business, grounded in commonplace aspirations to money, power, and esteem; if they were wholly chimerical they wouldn't so successfully evade the bullshit detectors of his fellow executives, much less the generalized paranoia that famously pervades the corporate world. What distinguishes Mark from countless others of his ilk is less the nature of his crimes (they boil down to embezzlement and fraud) than the extraordinary amount of imaginative energy he puts into them. If he is indeed some kind of lunatic, he is no crazier than the corporate system in which he operates.

That system's rickety mental health is astutely analyzed in *The Corporation* (2003), a Canadian documentary written by legal scholar Joel Bakan, who explores its ideas at greater length in his book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. Bakan argues that since corporations are legally defined as "persons," they should be held to the same standards of behavior as actual persons and that when corporate "persons" fail to meet these standards, they should be deemed criminal, psychopathic, or both. This is likely to happen frequently, Bakan observes, since the "legally defined mandate" of a corporation is "to pursue, relentlessly and without exception, its own self-interest, regardless of the often harmful consequences it might cause to others. As a result . . . the corporation is a pathological institution, a dangerous possessor of the great power it wields over people and societies." In support of this point, Bakan and his colleagues adduce criteria from the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, prepared by the American Psychiatric Association, and other such evidence. While *psychopathy* is not a clinical term in that manual, the equivalent term, *antisocial personality disorder*, is used to characterize persons who exhibit traits associated with psychopathic conditions, which include glibness, superficial charm, pathological lying, conning and

manipulating behaviors, no sense of remorse or guilt, shallow emotional affect, lack of empathy, parasitic relationships, irresponsibility, and a habit of shifting blame onto others.⁶

This describes the collective personality of ADM and the individual personality of Mark Whitacre with remarkable accuracy. Both show appealing faces to the world, lie without shame, manipulate without compunction, and feed parasitically off naïve victims and fellow scavengers alike. More important, however, is something else that Mark and the company have in common—the absence of a meaningful past, the lack or blockage of a sense of history. I mentioned this earlier in connection with Mark, and it applies in related ways to ADM, which retains ties to company patriarch Dwayne Andreas but shows no shred of interest in the institutional memory that might have led its executives to think twice before plundering the wealth and squandering the respect their firm has acquired (legitimately or not) over almost three-quarters of a century. If we come to sympathize with Mark in ways we wouldn't dream of doing with the others at ADM, it's largely because *The Informant!* portrays him as the fun, entertaining desperado who preys on the dull, disagreeable desperados. And he does so in such a thoroughgoing manner that his actions reverberate beyond the specifics of the movie's narrative.

Being and Becoming

To indicate how and why Mark's actions reach out so effectively, I must further develop the point that began this chapter: Mark is a nut that psychoanalysis could never crack. This is because psychoanalysis, like the other models mentioned earlier, has the kind of structure that philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call treelike or arborescent, fixed in place by sociocultural dictates and rooted in a primeval, unconscious past that must be plumbed and explored, however fitfully and obliquely, if its irregularities and dysfunctions are to be understood. As we have seen, however, Mark has constructed a fictitious past so successfully that even his wife believes he was an orphan adopted in childhood by a wealthy benefactor, and he has disavowed his factual past so completely that it has become irrelevant even to himself. As his zigzagging fabrications and invented "reality" attest, he has traded the rigidity of psychic arborescence for the helter-skelter dynamics of rhizomatic thought, which careens in all directions and sets down roots wherever it pleases. "A schizophrenic out for a walk," Deleuze and Guattari

write, “is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch. A breath of fresh air, a relationship with the outside world. . . . Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.”⁷ If any methodology can probe the mental processes of such a person, it is not the depth-oriented psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, which seeks the sources of subjectivity in early-life experience and insatiable unconscious needs. It is instead the desire-oriented schizoanalysis of Deleuze and Guattari, which holds that the subject is not an essential “self” but an infinity of desire-flows that can be either frozen into sociocultural *being* or liberated into untrammelled *becoming*. From a schizoanalytic perspective, Mark is, like all of us, an assemblage of desiring-machines in a state of incessant flux and instability. Unlike most of us, however, Mark instinctively resists the cultural codes that reduce the dynamism of libidinal desire to the stasis of convention and conformity; he goes with the mercurial flow, cheerfully oblivious to the fates of his family, his colleagues, and other fellow travelers less flexible than he. Soderbergh doesn’t speak of schizoanalysis, but he tapped into it (wittingly or not) in the aptly named *Schizopolis* (1996), and *The Informant!* certainly has a schizoanalytic ring, pursuing Mark’s proliferating schemes, deceptions, and illusions to their (il)logical conclusions without imposing social judgments on them. If one asked the filmmaker for a definitive verdict on Mark’s adventures, he might reply, “I don’t know. You tell *me*.”

Existential Assets

Schizoanalytically considered, Mark’s depthless personality and compulsive self-invention are not psychological flaws but existential assets, and Soderbergh treats them as such, celebrating his incessant energy and openness to experience. In this respect *The Informant!* resembles *Schizopolis*, the television miniseries *K Street* (2003), the improvisational *Bubble* (2005), and *The Girlfriend Experience*, which I take to be the Soderbergh pictures most strongly influenced by the work of John Cassavetes, a schizoanalytic filmmaker if ever there was one. “All my life,” he once remarked, “I’ve fought against clarity—all those stupid definitive answers. . . . A good movie will ask you questions you haven’t been asked before.”⁸ Writing of Cassavetes’s last major movie, *Love Streams* (1984), cinema scholar Ray Carney names properties that we can instantly recognize in *The Informant!* and the other films just mentioned: “the way characters are freed from fixed identities or abstract

systems of relationship . . . the unpredictability of scenes' development . . . and . . . the way [the film's] tones work not to dictate particular responses, but rather to entertain possibilities." Whereas ordinary films encourage the viewer's tendency to impose judgments and values, here "scenes complicate and delay judgments, forestalling resolutions and clarifications and suspending us among possibilities," keeping us off balance so as to encourage the kind of "exploratory stance" that characterizes the movie itself. Precisely.⁹

Looking for philosophical roots of this approach to experience and aesthetics, Carney goes to a source who predates Deleuze and Guattari by half a century. In one of his last books, philosopher and psychologist William James described empiricism as a way of thinking in which "reality cannot be . . . confined by a conceptual ring-fence. It overflows, exceeds, and alters. It may turn into novelties, and can be known only by following its singularities from moment to moment as our experience grows. Empiricist philosophy thus renounces the pretension to an all-inclusive vision. . . . It stays inside the flux of life expectantly, recording facts, not formulating laws. . . . Philosophy, like life, must keep its doors and windows open."¹⁰ This is truly a "philosophy of the wrecking ball," as Carney calls it, toppling the rationalist structures that James opposed because they "systematized the life out of life." I contend that in his best films Soderbergh, like Cassavetes, lays siege to the "designs for living [of characters and viewers] in order to allow real living to begin."¹¹

This is what Mark Whitacre does too, in his hectic, fluctuating life that is also a work of semi-aleatory art. He would not be able to embrace his novelties and follow his singularities so wholeheartedly, however, if he were committed to the kind of rooted, ordered existence that ordinary corporate executives—including the unimaginatively criminal sort in ADM's top ranks—lead as a matter of course. If we try to understand how Mark puts over such extravagant tricks on so many smart people for so long a time, we notice an interesting fact: Until his web starts to unravel well into the story, nobody he interacts with seems to think that something odd, untrustworthy, or threatening dwells underneath his regular-guy appearance. The explanation for this, I think, is that there *is* no underneath to his depthless, schizo-flowing self. The person and the persona are the same. *The Informant!* is a film of shiny, seductive surfaces leaning against *more* shiny, seductive surfaces, and one-dimensional Mark is its perfect protagonist just as Hamlich's happy-face music is its ideal accompaniment.

I'm not suggesting that Soderbergh's work in general or *The Informant!*

in particular has schizoesthetics as drastic as those of Cassavetes's greatest films; the maker of *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) and its sequels (2004, 2007) often seeks compromise between his more radical impulses and the concessions necessary for sustaining a career in commercial cinema. Despite its mainstream credentials, however—Damon, Hamlish, Warner Bros., and so forth—*The Informant!* is robustly offbeat stuff, and its sort-of-hero is a unique creation, embodying a fascination with façades that soars far beyond Hollywood's customary truisms about the deceptiveness of appearances. To say that Mark presents a false front the way an imposter wears a mask would miss the sincerity of his superficiality. If he were the kind of artist who crosses into philosophy, he might echo Oscar Wilde's comment about guises and disguises: "The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks."¹² And if he were the kind of artist who exhibits work in galleries, he might say what Andy Warhol said on the subject: "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it."¹³ What's below the surface *is* the surface, and Mark glides across it like a schizoskater whose blades engrave ever expanding rhizomatic patterns on the sleek topographical plane it offers up for inscription. This is the "schizorevolutionary . . . writing" that Deleuze and Guattari describe—a writing that embraces "all that flows and counterflows," attaining the "authentic modernity [that] consists in liberating what was present in art from its beginnings," namely, "the pure process that fulfills itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfillment as it proceeds—as art as 'experimentation.'"¹⁴

The implications of such an outlook are often prescient and political. A component of Mark's overflowing fantasy life, for instance, is an *idée fixe* that he will end up running ADM when its board of directors fires the present executives and rewards him for having exposed the old guard's corruption; seen in the context of the early twenty-first century, the notion that *he* is the only logical candidate to run the company he has just smashed up evokes the decision of the new Barack Obama administration that the only people qualified to repair the economic damage done by the George W. Bush gang were the very people (Timothy Geithner, Lawrence Summers, et al.) who facilitated and exacerbated that damage in the first place. More broadly, the self-inventing, antiestablishment nature of Mark's mentality makes him an energetic practitioner of deterritorialization, the schizoanalytic term for processes that liberate human energies from the means of production that are privileged by capitalist systems. These processes destratify labor and

power along rhizomatic lines of escape and are contested in turn by forces of reterritorialization and restratification, from which they again strive for freedom. “You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight,” Deleuze and Guattari write, “yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject—anything you like, from Oedipal resurgences to fascist concretions. Groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize.”¹⁵ The challenges are endless, but so are the possibilities. Mark’s loopy dances with ADM and the FBI are loose-cannon maneuvers that fall outside the carefully coded rules of business behavior, aiming to destabilize and deterritorialize the protocols of (amoral) rationality and (circumscribed) free enterprise on which the corporate structure rests. The system strikes back by reterritorializing him with a vengeance, putting him in prison to serve longer than the top executives on whom he blew the whistle. But it’s for ten and a half years, not the rest of his life, and he gets paroled after eight and a half. When he walks out of jail at the end of the movie we have no reason to doubt that his family, his spirits, and his anarchic imagination are all intact and ready for more action. He is as bracingly subversive as any character in recent cinema.

Impromptu Reflections

Mark’s affability and originality notwithstanding, his depthless personality makes him an incomplete figure, always at risk of sabotage by the confusions and commotions he produces. Soderbergh may identify with him in this regard, knowing that he’s far from ordinary as a filmmaker and that one commercial failure too many could undermine his future in an industry where, as Woody Allen once told me, the indispensable creative tool is big money. This could explain why Soderbergh softens the harshest consequences that rebounded on Mark in real life. According to Eichenwald’s account, Whitacre built up a substantial psychiatric dossier during his secret-agent years, undergoing multiple hospitalizations as well as receiving a lot of psychotherapy. The film includes the hospital stays and therapy sessions, albeit in sketchy and telegraphic form, and it signals Mark’s increasingly unhinged mental state by depicting a fact-based episode in which he fakes his abduction by unidentified kidnappers who, he falsely and hysterically claims, held him captive in the back of a car for twenty minutes. What the movie omits, however, are two suicide attempts by Whitacre when his informant career

was going off the rails; the second of these was staged in such a perfunctory manner that few could mistake it as more than a cry for help, but the first might well have been a serious effort to end his life.

Be this as it may, Harold Baker, the judge who accepted Whitacre's guilty plea and later sentenced him, saw no need to offer help; he did not deny Whitacre's bipolar disorder but found it irrelevant to his actions. "The court can find no clear connection between Mr. Whitacre's bipolar disorder and his criminal conduct," the judge stated when announcing the surprisingly harsh penalty. "At times, he displays what could easily be characterized as sociopathic behavior. It is difficult to know when Mr. Whitacre is lying and when he is telling the truth." In the end, Baker decided, Whitacre's dazzling success at ADM was interlaced with so much "mendacity, deceit, coercion, and theft" that his motivation could not have been anything but "just garden-variety venality and greed." Baker's readiness to ignore Whitacre's history of erratic, contradictory, and ultimately self-destructive behavior strikes me as judicial arrogance that Soderbergh would have done well to question.¹⁶

This said, I hasten to add that *The Informant!* as a whole limns Mark's rhizomatic mentality in terms so subtle and acute that the shortcomings of the courtroom scene seem almost beside the point. The key to Soderbergh's nuanced (schizo)analysis lies in the stream-of-consciousness voiceovers that I mentioned at the outset. Providing samples of Mark's interior musings as he goes about his daily life, they initially appear to be little more than wry supplements to the dialogue between characters onscreen. As the film progresses, however, patterns emerge. Some of the impromptu reflections have to do with unforeseen catastrophe—a man who spoke an ordinary sentence and abruptly succumbed to a fatal heart attack, a horse that had to be euthanized at a fair the Whitacres attended with their children. Others center on disguise and concealment, as when Mark mulls over the fact that polar bears hide their black noses when they need to blend in with snow-covered surroundings and wonders how they *know* their noses aren't white. Whatever their subjects, however, Mark's ponderings are consistent in three respects: they are rendered in a calm, casual tone; their voiceover presentation clearly distinguishes them from regular dialogue; and they are always anodyne, relating anecdotes, reminiscences, and bromides that reveal nothing of any consequence, to us or to Mark himself.

Why, then, has Soderbergh made them such an integral part of the film's fabric? At the beginning of this chapter I described Mark as a man who has

attempted to erase his past, lying about it to others and hiding it even from himself, perhaps fearing that if *he* acknowledges his secret self—we can now say his secret, *empty* self—then others might recognize it and reject it too. His interior monologues are a vital component of this strategy, displacing the stream of authentic consciousness with a haphazard current of trivia and ephemera that are as numbingly harmless as they are insipid and jejune. To understand why he causes this to happen, consider *The Demolished Man*, a justly acclaimed novel by science fiction author Alfred Bester published in 1953. The tale envisions a future in which telepathy has become an acquirable skill for those who have a genetic predisposition and work at cultivating the ability. In this environment a man sets out to kill a hated rival, knowing that he must somehow mask his murderous thoughts from police officers who can read minds. As part of his solution to the problem, he asks a jingle writer to compose a ditty that is devoid of meaning yet so relentlessly catchy that he won't be able to get it out of his head. The result:

Eight, sir; seven, sir;
 Six, sir; five, sir;
 Four, sir; three, sir;
 Two, sir; one!
 Tenser, said the Tensor.
 Tenser, said the Tensor.
 Tension, apprehension,
 And dissension have begun.¹⁷
 [repeat, repeat, repeat]

And on and on, ad nauseam, ad aeternitatem.

Mark's musings are less insufferably viral, but they serve the same purpose—jamming the frequency, filling the forebrain, flattening the intertwined *qualia* (in Henri Bergson's terminology) of authentic thought into the deracinated surfaces that characterize what Deleuze and Guattari call the body without organs, a dis-organized flow of "nonstratified, unformed" desire. Now we can reinterpret the title of the Whitacre saga: the *inform*-ant is *l'informe*, the unsublimated materiality that manifests anarchic freedom, Georges Bataille tells us, by eluding containment in meanings, concepts, and categories. When associated with human subjectivity, the radical abjection of *l'informe* brings the danger that identity may liquefy and seep away. An entropic bull in the china shop of modern business, Mark disseminates

structure-busting disarray at countless points along his rhizomatic path, so slyly and insidiously that no one catches on until the rhizome begins doubling back on itself, carrying him into situations so unstable that his protean pseudoselves can no longer evade the microfascisms of capitalism, law, and family that reach out to reterritorialize him. And now that we see the informant as l'informe, we can schizointerpret the exclamation point that Soderbergh has added to the story's original title. It points to a line of flight, but it also indicates a boundary, a limit beyond which Mark's protean self-inventions can no longer be sustained. Eventually, his elaborate house of fiction must break down.

Deconstruction and Collision

The collapse takes place in the last scene before Mark's trial, and the moment is signaled by an alteration in the voiceover pattern. As noted, the voiceovers' placement on the soundtrack, in counterpoint with the concurrent images, clearly distinguishes them from the film's regular dialogue—until now, when they start impinging on the dramatic action. Mark and Ginger are sitting in their living room, listening to Agent Shepard's deconstruction of a fabricated letter that Mark claims was written by Dr. Miller, his psychiatrist. Shepard has prepared meticulously for this moment—covering every base, foreseeing every objection, eliminating every potential weakness from his delineation of Mark's latest fraud. His charges are unchallengeable, but like the polar bear, Mark instinctively covers up. And in a startling twist, his spoken and unspoken voices collide, indicating the imminent meltdown of his overstressed mental circuits.

"The problem with the letter," Shepard says with obvious regret, "is it's a lie." Mark indignantly points to the (forged) signature and (doctored) letterhead. Shepard replies that the area code on the letterhead didn't exist at the time of the letter's date. More quibbling ensues, but we see from her expression that even faithful Ginger is finally accepting the awful truth about her husband. The new area code hadn't even been announced, Shepard continues, when the letter was allegedly written. And now Mark's voiceovers make their first appearance in the scene, spoken with an immediacy they've never had before.

MARK TO HIMSELF IN VOICEOVER: Ron Henkoff from *Fortune* called Dr. Miller and Dr. Miller confirmed—

MARK TO SHEPARD ALOUD: Henkoff—if you talk to Henkoff—Ron Henkoff—from *Fortune* magazine?—verified the letter with Dr. Miller—

SHEPARD: I talked to Dr. Miller, Mark.

MARK TO HIMSELF IN VOICEOVER: That's a violation of my doctor-patient confidentiality.

MARK TO SHEPARD ALOUD: That's a total violation of my doctor-patient confidentiality. You can't call Miller—

SHEPARD: Doctor-patient confidentiality doesn't apply to forgeries.

MARK TO HIMSELF IN VOICEOVER: Then why did *Fortune* magazine run the story?

MARK TO SHEPARD ALOUD: Then why would Ron Henkoff—for *Fortune* magazine—put it in—a cover story? Henkoff—if you talk to Henkoff—

And so on, until Ginger tearfully pleads with him to stop and Shepard sadly asks, “Why do you keep lying?”

MARK IN VOICEOVER: I don't know. [*long pause*]

MARK IN DIALOGUE: Well, *I* think I should go back to the hospital. . . .

At first these voiceovers seem to represent Mark's spur-of-the-moment thinking as he cooks up responses to Shepard's unmasking of his scheme. Voiceovers have never performed that function before in the film, however, nor have they seemed nearly as urgent, so their new rhythm and tone must have some other cause. A possible explanation is that Mark's unconscious has turned the pressure up, forcing itself into his reality after the decades of repression he has inflicted on it, but the movie hasn't implied psychoanalytical explanations for any of Mark's previous thoughts or actions, and there's no reason to think it has suddenly changed course.

In my view, these last-ditch voiceovers are the opposite of unconscious because they spring from the same invisible source that has produced everything we've heard and seen for the past hour and a half: they spring from Soderbergh, or more precisely, from *the film itself*. The film is greeting this singular moment in the story—the dis-organization of Mark's shape-shifting subjectivity as his rhizomatic line of flight enters its dying fall—by revealing itself as *our* ultimate informant and sending forth its schizodynamic power to resolve Mark's otherwise insoluble predicament. It is an extraordinary action

for a film to take, and a moving display of empathy and care. *The Informant!* clearly loves its eponymous schizotrickster, and it's hardly surprising that the epilogue finds him and Ginger on their way to a new beginning. Will they live happily ever after? I don't know. You tell *me*.

Notes

Epigraph: George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *A Collection of Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1981), 167–68.

1. A. O. Scott, "Another Soderbergh Puzzle!" *New York Times*, 17 Sept. 2009, AR1.
2. Lisa Schwarzbaum, "The Informant!" *Entertainment Weekly* 1067 (25 Sept. 2009), 84; Hiram Lee, "Not Enough Information: *The Informant!* Directed by Steven Soderbergh," *World Socialist Web Site*, 11 Nov. 2009, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/nov2009/info-n11.shtml> (accessed 9 Mar. 2010).
3. Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, trans. D. F. Nevill (London: E. E. Robinson & Co., 1901), §38A, 77.
4. The screenplay by Scott Z. Burns is closely based on Kurt Eichenwald, *The Informant: A True Story* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000). This was Eichenwald's second book, and it was a finalist for the Investigative Reporters and Editors Book Award and a J. Anthony Lukas Prize.
5. "Overview" and "Ethics & Values: The ADM Way," *ADM* (2010), <http://www.adm.com/en-US/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed 23 Mar. 2010).
6. *The Corporation* (2003), directed by Mark Achbar with Jennifer Abbott and written by Joel Bakan with narration by Achbar and Harold Crooks; Joel Bakan, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 16, 1–2, respectively; American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)*, 4th ed., with text revision (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000); Derek Wood, "What Is a Psychopath?" *Mental Health Matters*, 2 Feb. 2009, http://www.mental-health-matters.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=94 (accessed 25 Mar. 2009).
7. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 2.
8. Quoted in Ray Carney, *The Films of John Cassavetes: Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 184.
9. Carney, *Films of John Cassavetes*, 252.
10. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*, in *Writings, 1902–1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 979–1106, quoted in Carney, *Films of John Cassavetes*, 252–53.
11. Carney, *Films of John Cassavetes*, 254.

12. Oscar Wilde, "The Truth of Masks: A Note on Illusion," in *Intentions*, by Oscar Wilde (New York: Brentano's, 1905), 263.

13. Ann Temkin, Susan Rosenberg, and Michael Taylor, with Rachel Arauz, "Camouflage Self-Portrait, 1986, Andy Warhol," in *Twentieth-Century Painting and Sculpture in the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, 2000, <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/87487.html> (accessed 19 Mar. 2010).

14. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 370–71.

15. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 9.

16. Eichenwald, *Informant*, 547–48.

17. Alfred Bester, *The Demolished Man* (1953; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 43.