# Michael Mann's Miami Vice: Why this film?

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Miami Vice, *written and directed by Michael Mann*

*Miami Vice*, loosely rooted in the US television series of the 1980s (on which the new film's writer and director, Michael Mann, served as executive producer), treats a pair of Miami policemen, Sonny Crockett (Colin Farrell) and Ricardo Tubbs (Jamie Foxx). After the death of two federal agents, as the result of a leak, the pair are assigned to go undercover to expose and break up the international drug cartel responsible.

Crockett and Tubbs make contact with a powerful drug dealer, José Yero (John Ortiz), who operates in Haiti, Central America and beyond. Eventually, after they earn Yero's grudging trust, the two policemen encounter Isabella (Gong Li), the Chinese-Cuban businesswoman who manages the outfit's finances, and Arcángel de Jesús Montoya (Luis Tosar), its kingpin.

Crockett begins an affair with Isabella, which includes a brief, forbidden interlude in Havana. Tubbs's love interest, Trudy (Naomie Harris), also an undercover cop, is kidnapped by the mistrustful Yero and guarded by white supremacists. Trudi is rescued, but an explosion puts her in a coma. Yero denounces Isabella, for her affair, to Montoya. In the end, the police and the drug gang have it out in a fierce gun battle. Isabella is appalled to learn that Crockett is an undercover cop; he takes her to safety and parts with her.

Shot on high-definition video, the work has a remarkable look. What one remembers most about Mann's film are the images of the threatening south Florida sky, with its dark, textured clouds and ominous red streaks. Indeed, the filming, done in the summer of 2005, was interrupted for seven days by hurricanes. The sky and water are realistically and artistically presented.

The presence of Gong Li, veteran of a number of significant Chinese films in the 1990s, is also welcome. She is a serious performer, essentially in the company here, as far as the other leading actors go, of amateurs and poseurs.

*Miami Vice* has little more to recommend itself. The general outlines of the story are familiar, the characters largely stereotyped. The psychopathic Yero smiles, and then snarls, in a sinister manner to which we are well accustomed. This is how filmmakers of a certain type believe they can convey the monstrousness of the drug trade, by doubling or tripling the villainy of its representatives. It merely feels false.

The tough-minded, matter-of-fact cops and various law enforcement officials mumble tensely to one another, knowingly using police jargon. The performers in general, with the exception perhaps of Gong Li, act in a narcissistic and self-serious fashion. There is little spontaneity or vitality in the film, nor any serious engagement with contemporary existence. The clothes, the restaurants, the technology, the music may be up-to-date, but the North or South American present is lacking for the most part. The circumstances are largely fantasized and, worse, not very intriguing.

Michael Mann wanted, he says, to investigate the undercover phenomenon. He told a press conference recently: "When the proposition became really exciting for myself, and then for all of us, was the idea of really getting into undercover work, and what it does to you, what you do to it, and the whole idea of living a fabricated identity that's actually just an extension of yourself, and doing it in 2006, doing it for real and doing it right now...as a big picture that's going to be R-rated because you do dangerous work in difficult places where bad things happen, you have relations with women, there's sexuality and there's language, and that became an exciting proposition. But, it started with the real function, for the actors, and myself as well, as what is undercover work, for real?"

Assuming that a film could shed substantial light on this problem, which *Miami Vice* does not, would it be interesting? It seems unlikely. In fact, as his various published comments make clear, Mann begins with a mass of conformist assumptions about the police and society, of which he appears entirely oblivious.

In an interview with Scott Foundas of the *LA Weekly*, Mann observes: "In a postmodern globalized world, there is no criminal organization locked to a geographical place producing one commodity, like cocaine. Now, if you're running a transnational criminal organization, you're a master of tubing, down which anything can move: pirated software, frozen chickens out of Russia, Ecstasy from Holland."

His "transnational criminal organization" may be a reality, but its treatment is one-sided and superficial. Moreover, there are other, more compelling aspects of contemporary life, the social and psychological conditions under which great numbers of people live, for example, which Mann ignores entirely. We would like to know: why do American filmmakers continue to be so impressed by gangsters, among the most backward and boring creatures on earth? This fascination may very well be

bound up with immature notions about the alleged “freedom” of the criminal life.

In any event, the “transnational” criminals with whom Mann peoples his film are, in the end, very small fish. It is quaint, in the conditions of 2006, to paint them “larger than life” as he does. Far more dangerous and lethal criminals are operating at the highest levels of the American state apparatus and business world. Instinctively, audience members sense that the on-screen conflicts pale by comparison with those ongoing in the Middle East and Central Asia and others that are threatened, and their responses are diminished.

Why this film? It cost a good deal of time, effort and money, but why was it made?

Mann certainly aspires to be a serious filmmaker. By all accounts, he tackles every aspect of his work obsessively. He writes, directs and produces his films. No one can doubt the ferocity of his work ethic.

Foundas’s article discussed Mann’s methods. “His reputation as a perfectionist precedes him: On the set, he frequently operates the camera himself. At screenings of his films, he has been known to rope off seats that he feels have an undesirable viewing angle. And right now, he is tape-recording our conversation as well. He is driven and demanding, and he expects nothing less of those who collaborate with him.”

More than that, Mann (born in Chicago in 1943) has some knowledge, or ought to, about social and political realities. He was a student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and admits to having been influenced by the radical 1960s. He later studied at the London School of Economics, and one of his first film projects was a documentary made for NBC television on the May-June 1968 events in France, entitled *Insurrection*. Little of this suggestive history, however, makes itself felt in his current work.

Mann’s work ethic and his other admirable qualities are insufficient in themselves. As an artist, one must also draw important conclusions about life and society. Otherwise, the very obsessiveness can be an evasion, a means of forestalling criticism and difficult questions, both others’ and one’s own.

It is also possible to be terribly serious about secondary, even trivial matters.

Foundas is one of those who makes considerable claims for Mann. This is how he describes the latter’s cinematic universe: “Perhaps you have seen it: It is the story of the night and the city and the men who inhabit it—professionals to the core who operate on instinct, sometimes living inside the law, but more often indifferent to it. They will meet on rooftops or in desolate industrial expanses to suss out the terrain, plotting their next move, while the low rumble of an electric guitar sounds in the distance. Inevitably, there will come a woman, and with her the momentary illusion of a ‘normal’ life. And just as inevitably, that hoped-for bliss will prove as out of reach as Proust’s dream of fair Albertine.”

If the author were meaning to pull our leg, no one would object. This is an unintentionally satirical commentary on a certain kind of “post-modern” filmmaking (and criticism): devoid of significant content, indifferent to social life, aspiring above all to a certain look and feel. These are the kinds of images that must stream through the minds of advertising executives, successful bar and dance club operators, and perhaps the manufacturers of sportier automobiles.

On the *Senses of Cinema* web site, Anna Dzenis, in a 2003 piece, writes: “In a recent article in which filmmakers nominated the films of their ‘imaginary cinémathèque,’ [French director] Olivier Assayas positioned Mann together with Bresson, Tarkovsky, Pasolini, Visconti and Hou Hsiao-hsien. It is most fitting that Mann’s work should be seen alongside these other masters of the cinematic form. Watching a Michael Mann film is like being taken on a fantastic journey, in which you will be engaged with the poetics of the cinema in the grandest of possible ways.”

This is merely foolish. Mann has done little to deserve such consideration. That he is capable of interesting work is unquestionable. *The Insider* was a serious film, which tapped into the deep hostility of the American population to the giant conglomerates that dominate economic life, wreaking havoc on the lives and well-being of millions. He has followed that up, however, with a series of forgettable films.

Why, in the present complex and volatile circumstances, make this particular film? A mediocre, mildly entertaining, clichéd action film, about drugs and police?

This is not a matter of Mann’s personal failings. As a group, American filmmakers in particular are lagging terribly behind. For the most part, what they see and feel at present is narrow and limited. The insularity in Hollywood must be daunting. The widespread political opposition and discontent in the US is still largely inarticulate, it finds no expression in official channels and is not accessible to the writers and directors. The artistic problems persist in the film world. One sees occasional bright spots, but the overall picture has not changed.