Gus Van Sant's *Dead Man's Wire*: Rage at a rigged system

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The new film from veteran American director Gus Van Sant, *Dead Man's Wire*, is an honest and humane work, the best the director has created in years. While inspired by an event that occurred in 1977, the film clearly emerges from and conveys contemporary social anger.

Written by Austin Kolodney, *Dead Man's Wire* is built around several volatile days in Indianapolis half a century ago, when a furious small-time developer turned a private financial dispute into a live-televised siege.

On February 8, 1977, 44?year?old Tony Kiritsis stormed into Meridian Mortgage Company and took executive Richard Hall captive. Kiritsis had borrowed $110,000 to develop a 17?acre shopping center property and became convinced the mortgage company's president, M. L. Hall, had purposely sabotaged the project and pushed him toward foreclosure.

The distraught man sawed off a 12?gauge shotgun, rigged a wire that ran from the trigger around Hall's neck, and cinched it tight so that if Kiritsis was shot or Hall moved suddenly, the gun would fire into Hall's head. Eventually, Kiritsis brought Hall to his apartment and held him captive for roughly 63 hours, demanding $5,000,000, the cancellation of his debt, immunity from prosecution and, above all, a public apology from Hall senior.

Van Sant's film closely follows the original events. His Kiritsis (Bill Skarsgård) enters the Meridian offices and attaches the weapon by wire around the neck of Richard Hall (Dacre Montgomery). Warning police that any action on their part will cause the gun to go off, Kiritsis manages to bring his hostage back to his apartment.

Throughout the subsequent standoff, he repeatedly phones popular radio host Fred Temple (Colman Domingo), using live and recorded broadcasts to air his grievances and cast himself as a "little guy," a David standing up to a corporate Goliath.

Life in Indianapolis effectively comes to a standstill as live television and radio carry developments. As the emergency unfolds over several days, the scene turns into a full-blown media circus: an ambitious television reporter, Linda Page (Myha'la Herrold**)**, the smooth-talking Temple and crowds of listeners and viewers all contribute to shaping the narrative around Kiritsis. Meanwhile, the authorities make their own violent preparations.

Finally, Kiritsis marches Hall to a news conference, where he delivers a profanity-laced diatribe against Meridian Mortgage and defends his actions. Referring to his financial problems, he asserts: "It's a private equity trap meant to lure in common folk, give them a taste of the American dream, and then spit them right out! And you're … you're painting me a monster? I'm just a little guy."

In the end, Kiritsis is found not guilty by reason of insanity and spends a decade in psychiatric care rather than prison. Meridian Mortgage goes bankrupt.

Van Sant has made an intriguing, largely engaging film. As we have argued, he is at his best

> when he depicts the everyday life of his generally unusual or marginalized characters in a realistic fashion (*Mala Noche, Drugstore Cowboy, My Own Private Idaho, To Die For, Paranoid Park*, etc.). He is at his weakest in his more abstract or "high-concept" moments or films, such as *Good Will Hunting*, *Psycho*, *Elephant*, *Gerry* and others.

Dead Man's Wire is effective at registering Tony's mounting paranoia and rage as he fails to get satisfaction from the mortgage firm and is brushed off by the elder Hall (Al Pacino) vacationing in Florida. The flamboyant Hall-Pacino callously and cavalierly shuts down his son who pleads with him to issue an apology to save the latter's life. M. L. Hall speaks with Tony on the phone:

> Hall: We're gonna get this deal done, and you're gonna release my son.
> Kiritsis: Yeah, and what if I don't? … What then, huh?
> Hall: Well, I'll mourn the loss of one of my sons, and we will all rue the day you ever stepped foot into the offices of Meridian Mortgage.

Tony is portrayed by the media as an unstable yet oddly charismatic "common man" who sees himself challenging a system rigged against ordinary people, even as his methods grow increasingly reckless.

Richard, initially a terrified hostage, becomes more complex as he starts negotiating on Tony's behalf with his own father, blurring the lines between victim, intermediary and reluctant witness to the family's moral and financial compromises.

Tony rages against a financial system he believes has cheated

him, turning his hostage act into a twisted demand for dignity and recognition.

The Hall family and their mortgage company stand in here for an upper class that casually, confidently wields money and legal power, insulated from the consequences people like Tony face.

Tony nervously fires off darkly amusing verbal bursts and insults. He delivers denunciations of "them" (banks, rich people, the system) that both help paint him as desperate and win public support.

In perhaps his most important statement, Tony explains to the radio host Fred Temple:

> -I'm not a rich man. I'm a poor man. And that never bothered me. I could go gliding along and being poor and working like a dog and breaking even and being happy as a dog in dog heaven. But f—- these people. They played God and they lost. I'm a man that's fighting for everything that he owns, sir. Now... Now, do you have a wife and family, Fred?
>
> -Uh, yes. Yes, I do.
>
> -And do you love them?
>
> -Uh, yes, I do. I do. Very much so.
>
> -Say that they set you up. Said they're gonna take your cars or your house or your wife, your children, and then they're gonna laugh at you. Now would you be ready to kill, Temple?
>
> -Well, I... I'd be awfully... mad, brother.

Van Sant makes a point of showing working class people attentively listening to Tony's tirades on the radio. Callers to Temple's radio program praise him as a "hero," a "national treasure," someone finally standing up to the "parasites getting rich off the good people of Indianapolis." Tony insists at one point, "the people are listening."

Dead Man's Wire mixes gritty tension and offbeat humor. It deliberately borrows from '70s hostage and crime films, with a resulting texture often socially sharp and scrappy, rather than sleek and glossy. The presence of Pacino is no accident. *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), also about a hostage situation, is an obvious "predecessor."

Much of the action occurs in cramped quarters (especially Tony's apartment and the radio station) and heightens the social and moral claustrophobia. The soundtrack leans on period-specific styles and audio textures—funk, soul, rock and AM-radio style broadcast sound—to make the setting immediate rather than just decorative.

In interviews, Van Sant describes Tony as a kind of "antihero from the economic margins," someone moviegoers can understand without fully endorsing, and contrasts him with the more legally savvy world of the mortgage company and its wealthy owners. He presents Kiritsis as a man who feels economically discarded and organizes a spectacle to force the rich and powerful to listen.

Van Sant has said the story interested him because it echoes today's anger at corporate greed and financial institutions, and he draws parallels between the 1977 hostage crisis and recent incidents rooted in resentment toward CEOs, banks, and health?care giants.

During pre-production for *Dead Man's Wire*, external events pointed to the urgency of the film's themes. In December 2024, UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson was shot dead in Manhattan, by 27-year-old Luigi Mangione, who will stand trial this summer.

The director notes that the basic conditions—precarious debt, opaque financial schemes, and a sense that "the game is stacked" against ordinary people—haven't changed, so Kiritsis's grievances feel uncomfortably current even if his methods are extreme.

In fact, by every measure, social inequality is far more severe today than it was in 1977, a veritable golden age. To cite a few facts of American life:

- The top 1 percent of households has seen its share of total after-tax income roughly double, rising from approximately 7 percent in 1979 to 14 percent by 2022.
- Between 1979 and 2015, the top 1 percent of household incomes grew by 229 percent, while the incomes of the bottom 90 percent grew by only 46 percent.
- The top 0.01 percent of households experienced a cumulative income growth rate of 1,003 percent between 1979 and 2021.

Dead Man's Wire speaks to this. Kiritsis was no "working class hero" or a political model for anyone to follow, but through dramatizing his disoriented response to the fixed economic set-up, Van Sant has fashioned a tough-minded, taut drama. At the heart of it lies class warfare in America and the unrelenting drive of the ruling elite to swallow up a greater and greater share of the national wealth, fueling popular outrage.

Van Sant has too often demonstrated a kind of "passive resistance" in the past, an Andy Warhol-like accommodation to the culture and society. *Dead Man's Wire* is an angrier, more partisan work. Events appear to be moving him.