



Whitey: United States of America v. James J. Bulger Discussion Guide

Director: Joe Berlinger

Year: 2014

Time: 107 min

You might know this director from:

Hank: 5 Years from the Brink (2013)

Under African Skies (2012)

Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory (2011)

Crude (2009)

Metallica: Some Kind of Monster (2004)

Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2 (2000)

Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at

Robin Hood Hills (1996)

Brother's Keeper (1992)

FILM SUMMARY

James “Whitey” Bulger carved out a name for himself as a mastermind of the underworld, a ruthless murderer, gambler, drug dealer, and extortioner with a penchant for wrongdoing. Rising through the ranks of the Boston mob, contact with the FBI was inevitable. Rather than questioning his innocence as a devious criminal, **WHITEY** turns the camera on the American legal and justice system, unearthing corruption everywhere it points.

The public’s decades long fascination with Bulger, both as a criminal and fugitive, was immense, something director Berlinger shared. As the FBI and Bulger prepared to come head to head in court in 2013, Berlinger met with the vast gang of characters connected to Bulger’s reign of crime: family members of murder victims, fellow mob members, the defence and prosecution, and journalists who have followed his career. A red thread emerges: no matter where one stands in the line of Bulger’s fire, no one considers him an innocent man. The question they all want answered: were FBI agents controlled by Bulger’s bribing reigns or was he a paid confidential informant?

Coming in at 107 minutes, names and testimonies arrive at a fiery speed as one thing becomes crystal clear: the need to establish if Bulger was an informant or not. Berlinger captures Whitey’s voice on tape, as he admits to his criminality but denies whole-heartedly ever being an FBI informant, the dirtiest trick of all in his “good” bad guy book of the justified lawbreaker. And many, no matter how much they despise Bulger the man, agree that the FBI has a lot of explaining to do.

The trial’s and film’s end brings not clarity but confusion, with evidence dismissed, testimonies barred, and truth failing to emerge. The public is left to contemplate, along with Maryann Davis, wife of one of Bulger’s victims: “Do you trust the people that are supposed to serve and protect? What is the truth anymore? Who do you believe?”

FILM THEMES

Cheating, gambling, and murdering his way through life, Bulger was anything but a law-abiding citizen. When he was finally brought to justice, however, the case became more about his attempt to erase his reputation as an informant, with everyone suddenly appearing criminal.

AN UNUSUAL RELATIONSHIP

With the increasing power of the mafia, the FBI was specifically assigned to take down this group, learning how to infiltrate and make friends with the enemy. Thus the concept of the informant was introduced, an individual from the criminal world pairing up with someone from the law-abiding world. Right? As former Winter Hill Gang member Kevin Weeks states, “Everybody can be corrupted.” It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a clear line between law enforcers and lawbreakers, especially when federally sanctioned partnerships are built on deception and lies.

CORRUPTION EVERYWHERE

Once the journey towards the truth began – not to learn who was killed and what money was taken, but whether or not Bulger had informed the FBI or they had informed him – a great mess was revealed. There were no clear answers. There was no justifiable reason why Bulger had gone so long without being brought to justice. In the words of Tommy Donahue, the son of one of Bulger’s murder victims: “The FBI is worse than the mafia. They’re the most organized crime family on the planet, who can do whatever they want, change the laws when they want, and they’re not to be screwed with.” If this is correct we may never know, because for the sake of “security” the truth is buried deep and all we are left with is a game of he said she said.

ANYTHING BUT AN INFORMANT

Every social group has its own rulebook, including criminals. Killing, stealing, cheating; these are fair crimes to commit. Becoming a rat, however, is the ultimate betrayal. Allegiances are holy amongst lawbreakers, and FBI informants are not “good” kinds of bad guys but rather untrustworthy lawbreakers. Journalist Kevin Cullen says it best: “Whitey Bulger cannot have people think he was an informant. This is not about getting acquitted. This is about changing the narrative back to the one he spent years cultivating, that he is a good bad guy, a gangster with scruples, a criminal with standards.”

THE MEDIA AND THE EVER-ELUSIVE TRUTH

How do we, the public, access the news? The media is our tool, the connection between politicians, lawmakers, the government, and us. We rely on the media to bring us the truth, to expose wrongdoing, to make it impossible for injustice to maintain a safe hiding place. The trial of *The United States of America v James J. Bulger* raises some vital questions for citizens of the free world. Why was Whitey allowed to kill all those years, if he was an informant? Where was this alleged FBI protection? What really took place? The final word goes to Whitey: “There are no lessons learned. You can’t get a fair trial. You can’t get a fair hearing. The system here isn’t going to change.”

“These are our most important assets: informants. They’re the name of the game.”

John Connolly

“(Bulger) doesn’t mind being called a murderer, a criminal, a drug dealer. He doesn’t want to be called an informant. Where he came from, that’s the worst thing you can be.”

Prosecutor Fred Wyshak

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What did you know about James “Whitey” Bulger before watching the film? What impressions of this man did the film leave you with?
2. Did the film, in any way, seem slanted in one direction toward Whitey’s innocence as an FBI informant or not? Do you think director Berlinger gave a neutral account of the trial? Discuss.
3. Can we expect law enforcement agencies to be free from corruption? What steps can be taken to ensure that agencies such as the FBI are as clean and accountable as possible?
4. Is there any history of the mob/mafia in your community? Is there much gang-related violence in your community? If so, what does this stem from and how is it handled, at least in the public’s eye?
5. Do you believe all people have a predisposition towards some degree of corruption? Can all individuals be corrupted, provided the right amount and type of temptation is on offer?
6. To the average non-criminal, murder is the most terrible crime one could imagine committing. Why is being labeled an informant such a nasty thing in the criminal world? Discuss the existence of a different moral code in the underworld.
7. After watching the film, do you believe that Whitey was an FBI informant, or rather that he had the FBI working for him? What led you to this conclusion?
8. Do you think Whitey received a fair trial?
9. Does the U.S. government owe the families of the murder victims any sort of retribution? Do you believe the FBI had a hand in the death of the people Whitey was convicted of murdering, and if so, in what capacity should the FBI be expected to make amends to the victims’ families?
10. Discuss the notion of informants. Are informants essential to an effective crime-fighting force? Can a government provide trustworthy crime-fighting when relying on the testimony of corrupt individuals? Where is the line drawn between law-abiding FBI agent and law-breaking informant?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Director Joe Berlinger has been working in non-fiction filmmaking for over 20 years, and has directed such features as 2004's "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster," which helped to reshape the rockumentary. His HBO series "Paradise Lost" sparked a worldwide movement that led to the acquittal of three men wrongfully given life sentences in prison.
- David Boeri, a reporter at Boston's WBUR and author of "Bulger on Trial: Boston's Most Notorious Gangster and The Pursuit of Justice," who also provided a number of interviews in the film, served as the film's consulting producer.
- From start to finish, the filming and editing of WHITEY took only six months. Members of Bulger's defence team and family members of Bulger's victims both attended the film's Sundance premiere.
- The last time Bulger had been imprisoned before his capture in 2011 was in 1965. He served time at the infamous Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary from 1959 to 1962.
- Catherine Greig began dating 45-year-old Whitey in 1975, when she was 24. After her firefighter husband left her for her twin sister, Greig was happy to be swept off her feet by the amorous Bulger, who showered her in expensive gifts. Greig, who worked as a dental hygienist, moved in with Bulger in 1982 and fled with him from the FBI to California in 1995.
- James Joseph "Whitey" Bulger, Jr. was born in 1929, the eldest of three boys. His father was born in Canada, while his mother was a first generation Irish-American. Due to his father losing one of his arms in an industrial accident, the family was reduced to poverty. Drawn to a life of crime, despite his two brothers excelling in school, Bulger was first arrested at the age of 14 for larceny. After serving in the Air Force for a few years, Whitey received an honorable discharge in 1952, and his life in crime kicked off. He remained fiercely loyal to "Southie," South Boston, where he was raised.
- Bulger took control of the Winter Hill Gang in 1979. The Winter Hill Gang, also referred to as Boston's Irish Mob, were given their name by Boston journalists in the 1970s, after the Winter Hill neighbourhood north of Boston. The gang was predominantly known for fixing horse races.
- The FBI - Federal Bureau of Investigation - was established in 1908 by Attorney General Charles Bonaparte, who was serving under President Roosevelt. Originally known as the Bureau of Investigation with 34 employees in 1908, the name was officially changed in 1935 to FBI.
- Catherine Greig was sentenced to 8 years in prison for harboring a fugitive.
- Whitey was sentenced to two life sentences and ordered to pay \$19.5 million to his victims and to forfeit \$25.2 million to the government.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Invest** in today's youth by encouraging them to not get involved in gangs, a form of the mafia and mob in today's world. [The National Gang Center](#) provides more information.
2. **Read** one of the many books written about James "Whitey" Bulger over the years. Many of the authors were featured in the film, including Kevin Cullen, Shelley Murphy, David Boeri, Dick Lehr, and T. J. English.
3. **Watch** "Black Mass", the filmic story of the life and times of James J. Bulger that was released in 2015, featuring Johnny Depp in the role of Whitey. Give consideration to the pros-and-cons of Hollywood retelling vs. documentary.
4. **Watch** "The System with Joe Berlinger", a 5-part TV series produced by Al-Jazeera America, where director Berlinger explores controversial cases within the U.S. criminal justice system.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.