

Fogged in

by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

Grimly purposeful, with barely a shadow of humor, *Insomnia* is one of those post-*Seven* thrillers that's so puffed up with its own importance that it doesn't feel it has to bother to be entertaining. The Hillary Seitz script (adapted from a 1997 Norwegian movie of the same name) focuses on Will Dormer (Al Pacino), an L.A. cop who's flown in, along with his partner, Eckhart (Martin Donovan), to help an Alaska fishing town solve the murder of a high school girl. They set a trap for the killer, but in the ensuing chase through an unfamiliar, fog-shrouded terrain, Dormer shoots his partner by mistake.

Both Eckhart and Dormer are under investigation by Internal Affairs back home, and Eckhart was about to turn himself in and make a deal, so he dies believing Dormer eliminated him to save his own skin. Hidden by the fog, the killer, a mystery novelist named Finch (Robin Williams), witnesses their final exchange and blackmails Dormer into helping him frame an innocent man for his crime. The movie's title refers to the guilt that keeps the cop awake night after night while everyone around him assumes Eckhart was downed by the same unknown assailant who killed the teenager.

Seitz and director Christopher Nolan count on the audience's getting so wrapped up in the issue of corruption and in the thematic doubling of the cop and the killer that it won't notice the ridiculous plotting. (The scenes that detail Dormer's meticulous efforts to keep the heat away from Finch while covering up his own shooting of Eckhart are fairly idiotic.)

Nolan got away with it last year in his art-house puzzle-picture hit *Memento*: it didn't appear to bother anyone that the hero, a man suffering from short-term memory loss, spent most of the picture telling people he suffered from short-term memory loss. But *Memento* at least had a gimmick and a surprise dénouement; *Insomnia* is laid out in obvious, and implausible, terms.

And the film's assumption that the cop and the killer are alter egos is moral nonsense, just as it was in the 1984 Clint Eastwood movie *Tightrope*, in which Eastwood plays a cop whose hunt for a sex killer in the New Orleans demimonde

forces him to confront his own attraction to the dark side of sex. A cop who gets turned on by the thought of sadomasochism doesn't inhabit the same moral territory as a man who kills the women he sleeps with, and a cop who crosses a line in a murder investigation (that's the secret Dormer is hiding from IA) is clearly distinguishable from a middle-aged man who beats a teenager to death when she resists his advances.

Insomnia doesn't have one convincing scene. It doesn't help that Seitz puts dialogue in the mouths of young actors that might have been written by high schoolers. Maura Tierney, often astonishing on NBC's *ER*, is stuck in the role of the hotelkeeper who seems to exist so that there's someone around to listen to Dormer spout the sad tale of his checkered past. The last time we see her, she's sound asleep on his bed while he's wandering around the room in a haze of exhaustion. This shot, which is a howler, is typical of Nolan's literal-mindedness. Tierney is fully clothed, so presumably it's meant to signify not that the two had sex, but that everyone eventually gets to sleep except poor Will Dormer.

Pacino marches through his masochistic scenes like a battle-weary soldier. It isn't great acting (how can it be, when the material restricts him to two or three notes?), but it's often technically impressive. Williams, on the other hand, does possibly the worst acting of his career, reading every line as if he were about to burst into tears. It's been so long since Williams has shown any spark of talent on screen (roughly a decade) that it's difficult to believe that the inventive, quicksilver performances he gave in movies like *Moscow on the Hudson*, *Cadillac Man* and *The Fisher King* weren't the work of someone else.

The only wide-awake acting in *Insomnia* comes from Hilary Swank, who plays the novice small-town cop who idolizes Dormer but is clever enough to work out the truth. The role is a cliché that Swank sidesteps neatly by playing it moment by moment, with the unconventional combination of wonder and quick reflexes that she brings to both large roles (*Boys Don't Cry*) and small (*The Gift*). She's the only part of the movie that rings true.