

THE THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR

Directed by Norman Jewison
Produced by Norman Jewison
Distributed by United Artists
Released in 1968

One movie where style certainly trumps substance is *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Rarely has such an insubstantial plot been so earnestly staged, dazzling the eye while dulling the mind. First-time screenwriter Alan R. Trustman's script substitutes expectant pauses for smart dialogue, and where no words came to mind, actors are told to just laugh and laugh while the audience waits and waits.

The setup for the robbery is pretty ingenious, with the crooks knowing nothing of their ringleader and having never met each other. But still the boundaries of cinematic credibility are exceeded. Has this venerable bank become so rigid and complacent that cash is transferred at the same time every day? And they just always leave a door open to the security guard station, allowing a hood to poke into their business with the barrel of a gun? And, on top of that, does nobody care when guys in sunglasses start dropping sacks of cash into the back of a station wagon? Maybe the crooks got lucky. But would the meticulous Thomas Crown design a heist that wasn't fool-proof? According to the erratic script, yes, he would.

Somehow Vicki, the preternaturally-intuitive pretty insurance investigator, targets Thomas Crown and no one else. He's more than happy to make a game of it. But after their kaleidoscopic kiss, things stagnate. She wants to help him, but she *really* wants her 10%. If she sticks with him she can have 100% of that stolen money. And she does find him quite hunky. So, why not run away with Tommy? Is it her conscience or the law?

After all the trouble that first robbery brought him, Crown should give crime a rest, but he expresses dissatisfaction with 'the system' and says he has to make another go at it. This second caper is a test of Vicki's loyalty, but it doesn't seem to be a fair test, because it's also a means for his escape from the country. Instead of continuing their omnipresent surveillance, the police must figure he can't leave the country when there's a robbery. How would he manage it? How would he pick up the dough? The motivation for the second robbery actually makes more sense than the first, but he doesn't seem to give Vicki a fair shake. She could show up at the drop point by herself, for 'moral support.' But he wouldn't know if she did. Or maybe he's supposed to be so sharp that he knew she'd turn him in before it all went down.

Vicki, whom he likes for being just as anti-establishment Establishment as himself, decides to tie the noose, but she's left looking silly while he's sipping spirits at 30,000 feet. He never does get caught, but his decision to rob that first bank relegated him to a permanent self-imposed exile. Earlier in the film, at the tail end of the pointless glider sequence, he tells his gal-pal he worries about what he is going to be tomorrow. Robbing that bank decided the matter for him. He bears the burdens of a thinking man's super-con, but he's really not that deep. He's

just Thomas Crown, stealing by proxy to distract himself from a hasty demise, never far enough in the future.

The elaborate split-screen effects, sometimes distracting, sometimes engaging, are always memorable. They succinctly convey concurrent events and make an atmospheric nothing like the polo sequence too expensive to cut. They were inspired by the excellent short film *A Place To Stand*, directed by Christopher Chapman and featured at Expo '67 in Montreal. Director Jewison is Canadian.

A second distinguishing characteristic of the film is the extraordinary song "The Windmills of Your Mind." The lyrics, by Marilyn and Alan Bergman, are compatible with the mood of the movie, but the song stands alone as a fleeting discourse on perception, how sometimes dreams seem more real and more significant than what we awake to; and we wonder what being alive really means. If the movie were as deep as this song, the angst of duty and betrayal would weigh on the characters more heavily than their incessant quest for diversion, and we'd have tension, not a tête-à-têtes.