

# THE THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR

Directed by John McTiernan  
Produced by Michael Tadross, Pierce Brosnan, and Beau St. Clair  
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
Released in 1999

A narrative film is a work of fiction. In real life we never get all our questions answered. But in most movies everything is explained before too long. And why not? The filmmakers have total control. There's no reason things shouldn't make sense. But when we screen a film we can be distracted by goofs, continuity errors, sloppy green-screening, mannered acting—any number of things.

Since in real life everything isn't explained, would that mean if a movie does explain it all, it ceases to feel real?

Can we be distracted by perfection? If too much doesn't make sense, the left brain that is always thinking it's only a movie will flood the conscious mind with distracting, deprecating assumptions of the filmmakers' transparent incompetence.

Well, our overwhelming impression of this film, after we've become accustomed to Crown's schemes and scams (the most unexpected being the hidden dogs-playing-poker canvas, and Renoir-on-the-fire), is a vicarious indulgence in luxury. From the first shot of the Jaeger-LeCoultre wrist watch, to the crystal glass with which Crown toasts his pinched painting, to the catamaran, to the high-stakes golf game; and then the glider, the jet, the Bulgari necklace, the mansion, and the skyscraper, we are overwhelmed by our hero's wealth. We like that it's being shared with us. And we like him. He's not stealing paintings as much as he's shuffling them around. It's all a lark, as it was to the protagonist in 1968's *The Thomas Crown Affair*. But in that story Mr. Crown sewed destruction, including probable shooting deaths in the second bank robbery. That Crown had no justification for his lashing out at "The System." '99 Crown doesn't lash out, but shares the fun with everyone. And instead of just hiding and brooding like the other Crown, '99 Crown recruits a bunch of east European criminals and betrays them to the law, donates a painting, raises a forger's daughter, and offers Catherine Banning a better life (where '68 Crown gave her the non-option of being with him and trashing the law versus upholding the law and being alone).

And we want Thomas Crown to succeed. We don't even know what his goal is when he dons the bowler hat for the climactic sequence; but we know we don't want him to get caught. The film has swept us along with its luxury and its ingenious plotting. Thomas Crown has been elevated to near-mythic status. But can we accept that he takes "Banks of the Seine at Argenteuil" (right brain) without begrudging the screenwriters who couldn't find a way to explain the theft (left brain)? What we're given is a joke without a punch line. But at least we get a non sequitur of sorts.

Now, it's possible that, since every security man was tracking the bowler-capped Crown acolytes, someone could have gone through the ceiling of the Impressionists' wing and stolen

the Manet. Who knows, maybe the screenwriters did have a solution, but they thought the audience wouldn't accept it so they played up the mystery angle.

In the end, does *The Thomas Crown Affair* suffer for being too smart for its own good? No. It's a little cocky, but it's all played with a wink and a nod. It doesn't take itself too seriously. Ultimately, it is just a very sophisticated romance. And where the '68 version was pseudo-tragic, this one is blithe and fulfilling.

By the time the audience realizes the plot is about to go off the rails, the story is safe because we're invested in the characters; we've been made to care. Indeed, the inner workings of one final Thomas Crown meta-prank pale beside our hero's sudden appearance at the film's conclusion on the airplane.

Every twist and turn of the cat-and-mouse plot brings the couple together or drives them apart. For all the high-gloss sheen and jaw-dropping set pieces, the most important scene in the film might be Thomas's fight with Catherine after she flees the Bentley. This is where we realize that Thomas's machinations are intended to force Catherine to admit that she genuinely cares for Thomas, that he is more to her than a lust-buddy. It's time for her to admit her vulnerability, for the games to stop, and to get real.

In the end, she does the right thing. She does alert the authorities that he's going to return the painting, and she returns the gift-Manet. And, blessedly, Thomas doesn't punish her like '68 Thomas abandoned Vicky. '99 Thomas acts like he wants Catherine to ignore the law. But maybe he only does that so he can be sure she is determined to uphold it.

We know from the counseling sessions that Thomas takes a juvenile delight in his wrongdoing because he is avoiding commitment; high-stakes busyness fills the gap. Indeed, both he and Catherine have the same problem—they live shallow lives of indulgent carnality. Thomas realizes this before she does and takes it upon himself to help her change, putting his own freedom at risk in the process.

Thomas Crown has a decidedly wicked sense of humor. But the film has made clear that his interest in Catherine Banning is no joke. In the end, we don't want him to get caught simply because we want them to *be* together; plot mechanics are secondary to characterization and consequences. Because both Thomas and Catherine have shown their willingness to change, we believe that, now, they can *stay* together. In their last confrontation before the film's climax, in his bedroom, he tells Catherine that he is taking the risk of trusting her. But to do what? Maybe he's really saying, *I'm going to risk loving you. Have the courage to love me back.*

For, in the final analysis, *The Thomas Crown Affair* is more about mergers than acquisitions.