
***The Sting* George Roy Hill, 1973**

From its very beginning, *The Sting* thrives on amazing its viewer. But what it exactly aims at is rather diversion than entertainment : in the opening scene of the movie, the viewer is taken through a phone conversation about a mob boss that is having the weekly cash benefits of a local joint sent over. The accent is put on how much money they are dealing with, and on how the man delivering it should not let himself be led astray from his task. However, a dozen meters out of the door, Johnny Hooker and his friend Hustler palm the 10,000\$ from him, while making him believe that they are trusting him with some of their own money. While the loss of this amount of cash is probably expectable, nothing, either in the narration or in the filming of the scene, gives away the gist of the con until it is over. This scene introduces a pattern that will occur repeatedly at different scales throughout the movie : the spectator is shown a scam through subjective eyes, and develops some anticipation about its outcome, but when the trick unfolds, he discovers that the situation still has some surprises left for him.

One could in fact summarize the film as the story of how Hooker finds a mentor in an older con man named Gondorff, and enlists his help in avenging the murder of a friend by playing a big con on one of the main mafia bosses of Chicago, Doyle Lonnegan - but that would not reveal much. The film revels in playing on the spectator's expectations, putting the emphasis on the preys of its scams rather than on the details of how the trap is about to spring on them. But while it does not expose the ropes of its tricks clearly, it still dares to place them on the screen. And while the characters are shown as nearly unbelievably gifted (their ability to palm cash envelopes, cards or wallets is properly amazing), their actions are all set in impeccable threads of causality. The movie therefore becomes even more pleasurable after several viewings, when the trained mind of the spectator notices all the signs and portents along the way - like the position of Gondorff's

hands during an hilarious poker game. And perhaps the best part of that exercise is that not everything is made of material details : the very way the actors play their character becomes two-fold on a second viewing, giving, for example, a whole new meaning to the exchange of looks between Hooker and Gondorff at the beginning of the last scene.

But the movie even goes beyond the physical organization of this elaborate masquerade : each main character also has a defining sequence where he carefully explains his needs and impulses to someone close to him, allowing us to see their part on this complex play as the search for the fulfillment of more serious and dire needs. Perhaps the most surprising of those scenes is the one where Lonnegan states that his motives for exacting revenge on the drifters that stole money from him during a golf game : in a way, every single character, whatever his camp, is there driven by a necessity, giving some tragical dimension to the movie's story.

However, even if the movie may very well present some aspects of tragedy, its humoristic tone, happy ending, and comic scenes leave little doubt as to its belonging to a comedy genre that is colored in a particular shade : its inept, obtuse, stubborn and very angry bad guy, for starters, seems to be fond of throwing tantrums. The dirty cop that is running after Hooker then ends up literally doing so during a long sequence centered on a train station ; in a movie where pursuit scenes seem to oddly abound. Add in that in one magnificent, surreal shot, we can see the prostitutes of a brothel enjoy themselves on a merry-go-round at the end of a long day of work, and the movie's humor starts to bear a strong similarity to some absurd world drafted from one of Tex Avery's demential cartoons. In the end, it is this partly cynical, absurd humor, enacted in the setting of the Great Depression in poor suburbs of Chicago, that makes the movie's irresistible charm and compelling story blend in a surprising pearl of a movie.