



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

California Split

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

In the remarkable unbroken panning shot at the beginning of *Thieves like Us* – with the convicts glimpsed at the start of its parabola suggesting the inevitable consequence of the criminal action with which it ends – Robert Altman implies an ineluctable fate awaiting his heroes in their attempt to play outlaw to society. By contrast, the opening of *California Split* is almost wilfully fragmented and fussy; and one doesn't go far wrong if one assumes by analogy that here, however oddly in a film which focuses on the obsessive nature of gambling, freedom of choice is the name of the game.

Amid the spacious yet somehow constricting amenities of a Californian casino, Charlie Waters (Elliott Gould) is wandering like a lost soul, awaiting a place at the poker tables. Idly he inserts a coin in a machine, which obliges with an illustrated lecture on the history of gambling. As he comments on the commentary, and its images mingle with the film's while the credit titles unfold, the confusion inherent in the sight of a roomful of gamblers absorbed in their variously mysterious pursuits gradually increases until one is conditioned for the total claustrophobia of the second sequence, set in a funereal bar where Charlie, having been ejected on suspicion of cheating, meets Bill Denny (George Segal), who fled as a consequence of the same incident, and the pair of them cement their comradeship by getting drunk and trying to catalogue Snow White's seven dwarfs to the accompaniment of a tirade of woe from two go-go dancers.

The starting point of that gambling travelogue we are treated to by Charlie's coin, illustrated by a still of grim-faced Western gambler-gunmen calling the shots, is that times have changed. For a while, with Charlie and Bill accused of being in partnership to defraud, both of them making hasty exits, and Charlie being subsequently mugged by his victim, it looks as though Altman disagrees. In a succession of persistently claustrophobic settings, which suggest a world running parallel to everyday life on different time and moral scales (typically, Charlie and Bill seek refuge after the mugging with two call-girls, whereupon everybody formally breakfasts and retires to bed with the curtains drawn against the daylight), he sets his two heroes on a Dostoevskian road to disaster. Yet unexpectedly, against all the rules, they not only emerge sane, healthy and the richer by \$41,000 apiece, but prove in the process that they are absolutely free of any obsession about the gambling that obsesses them.

In this film about chance, chance is the absolute ruler. Charlie and Bill happen to meet because someone mistakenly assumes they are partners; they happen to strike up a partnership because Charlie (the professional gambler) needs cheering up from a run of bad luck, and Bill (the family man) needs cheering up after an unhappy separation from his wife; and they happen to win because professional Charlie leaves the gambling to amateur Bill because he thinks the latter is riding a streak of luck, and because Bill realises in time that what he took to be a 'special feeling' of inspiration was in fact nothing more than a streak of luck. Altman underwrites the notion of chance by giving the film a casually improvised surface which seems to obey no law but the need to let a gag run its course and then top itself with another irrelevancy.

Lying in bed in the call-girls' flat, for instance, Charlie is still muttering darkly to himself 'Happy, Bashful, Doc ...' and coming (albeit delightfully) to the same dead end in Disneyland as he had before. And when the two call-girls casually vanish to an assignment in Hawaii, one feels that they were introduced in the first place mainly to furnish an excuse for the outrageously funny interlude in which Charlie and Bill pose as vice squad officers to get rid of the elderly transvestite who has hired the girls for an evening of women's talk.

Yet under its *M*A*S*H*-like surface, *California Split* reveals a very distinct structure radiating from two hidden backbones. One is the relationship between Charlie and Bill, which plays happily – unlike *M*A*S*H*, where Gould and Sutherland could have exchanged roles – on the conflicting personalities of the two stars. Where Elliott Gould is the wild eccentric reacting to the improbable with imperturbably calm familiarity, George Segal is his exact opposite, ordinary man threatening to splinter into hysteria at the onset of the unexpected. And as Gould's Mad Hatter conducts Segal's Alice through California's night-town, one begins to glimpse the irony: whereas crazy Charlie, the quintessential loner, effortlessly establishes stable relationships with the shreds of humanity that drift past him, Bill is so intent on the necessity of recapturing the emotional security which has deserted him along with his wife that he is unable to maintain any relationship at all, ultimately rejecting even Charlie's proffered friendship.

It is in this, and not in his gambling – which in Charlie's case assures his freedom – that Bill is obsessed; and it is in this that he contributes to the second structural backbone of the film: the omnipresence of obsession. When Bill and Charlie first meet in the nightclub, Altman suddenly interposes another character, a woman pouring out complaints to the barman, who effectively blocks them from the camera. The formality, indeed the insistence with which he does so, suggests that – as so often in his films – he means us to be less attentive to his heroes than to the flora and fauna that strew their path. And as in *The Long Goodbye*, he presents an extraordinary, entomological study of a section of society whose common denominator is a determination to get away from the routine of work, home and sleep, and whose characteristic is the ability to become trapped in some form of meaningless routine.

Picked out individually from the tableau of somnambulistic gamblers, racetrack mobs, boxing-match spectators and after-hours muggers, they obviously mark time on their sad treadmill: the ageing transvestite with nowhere to go, the young whore (Gwen Welles) who falls in love with every client, her older friend (Ann Prentiss) who picks up the pieces after each disillusionment, and a whole gallery of ladies of easy virtue chorusing the difficulty of living. It is central to the film, and characteristic of its sense of people walking down their own tramlines, that when the paths of Bill and the young whore cross for a brief moment of tender promise, each is so mindful of his own image (her availability, his propriety) that they can do nothing but diverge.

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1974/75

CALIFORNIA SPLIT

Director: Robert Altman
©: Reno Associates
Production Companies: Reno Associates, Columbia Pictures Corporation
Production Company: Bright-Persky Associates *
Executive Producers: Aaron Spelling, Leonard Goldberg
Producers: Robert Altman, Joseph Walsh
Associate Producer: Robert Eggenweiler
Production Manager: Tommy Thompson *
Production Co-ordinator: Kelly Marshall
Assistant to the Producers: Jack Cachin
Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson
2nd Assistant Director: Alan Rudolph
Script Supervisor: Carole Gister
Casting: Scott Bushnell
Screenplay: Joseph Walsh
Director of Photography: Paul Lohmann
Camera Operator: Edmond Koons
Camera Assistants: Richard Colean, Ron Fraitzvog
Electrical Gaffer: Randy Glass
Grips: Harry Rez, Eddie Lara, Tom Doherty
Editor: Lou Lombardo
Titles Editor: O. Nicholas Brown
Editorial Assistants: Marion Segal, Stephen W. Altman
Assistant Editors: Tony Lombardo, Dennis M. Hill
Art Director: Leon Ericksen
Set Decorator: Sam Jones
Sets: Michael Ignon *
Property Master: Jerry Graham
Costumer: Hugh McFarland
Make-up: Joe Dibella
Title Design: Dan Perri
Music Played and Sung by: Phyllis Shotwell
Sound Crew: Chris McLaughlin, George Wycoff
Sound Mixer: Jim Webb

Dubbing Mixer: Richard Portman
Sound Editor: Kay Rose
Assistant [Sound Editor]: Randy Kelley
Unit Publicist: Regina Gruss

Cast:

George Segal (Bill Denny)
Elliott Gould (Charlie Waters)
Ann Prentiss (Barbara Miller)
Gwen Welles (Susan Peters)
Edward Walsh (Lew)
Joseph Walsh (Sparkie)
Bert Remsen (‘Helen Brown’)
Barbara London (lady on the bus)
Barbara Ruick (Reno barmaid)
Jay Fletcher (robber)
Jeff Goldblum (Lloyd Harris)
Barbara Colby (receptionist)
Vince Palmieri (first bartender)
Alyce Passman (go-go girl)
Joanne Strauss (mother)
Jack Riley (second bartender)
Sierra Bandit (woman at bar)
John Considine (man at bar)
Eugene Troobnick (Harvey)
Richard Kennedy (used car salesman)
John Winston (tenor)
Bill Duffy (Kenny)
Mike Greene (Reno dealer)
Tom Signorelli (Nugie)
Sharon Compton (Nugie’s wife)
Arnold Herzstein, Alvin Weissman, Marc Cavell, Mickey Fox, Carolyn Lohmann (California Club poker players)
‘Amarillo Slim’ Preston, Winston Lee, Harry Drackett, Thomas Hal Phillips, Ted Say, A.J. Hood (Reno poker players)
USA 1974©
108 mins

* Uncredited

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