

# An Analysis of David O. Russell’s “American Hustle”

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## ABSTRACT

Con artist, confidence man, swindler or hustler, American history, literature and movies are replete with examples of characters, from P.T. Barnum and Gatsby to Trump, who play on the gullibility of others. David O. Russell has crafted an exceptionally entertaining story of con men, their marks and the FBI that is also a brilliantly crafted study of truth, deception and what it means to be American.

KEYWORDS : David O. Russell, tension, hustle, propulsiveness

“American Hustle”, written and directed by David O. Russell, is a seemingly light hearted procedural comedy about con artists and the FBI that is upon greater reflection a brilliantly crafted study of truth, deception and what it means to be American. Like many masters of their craft, David O. Russell makes what is in fact a complex work of art look effortless.

The most characteristic feature of David O. Russell movies is their energy level. Robert DeNiro has called this “propulsiveness”. (Directors Guild, 2016) Another way to describe it is the Japanese use of the English word “tension”. The word “tension”, like loan words in many languages, means something slightly different than it does in an English dictionary. The Japanese meaning of “tension” is closer to “excitement”, in a positive sense. In Japan, people say “tension takai” or “high tension”. It’s how a child feels before she opens her Christmas presents. “American Hustle” is “high tension”, which is to say, excited, caffeinated, almost manic. It is almost impossible to take your eyes off the movie once it begins.

“American Hustle” features an ensemble cast of some of the best young actors working in Hollywood, all of whom have worked with Russell nu-

merous times. In “American Hustle”, Christian Bale, Amy Adams, Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence give performances that are nuanced, risk taking and true. David O. Russell’s talents include getting dynamic performances from his cast.

On the surface, the movie is about con artists and an FBI sting operation that features characters almost comical in their devotion to success. At a deeper level, it is a character study that examines the nature of truth versus the version of ourselves that we present to others. The question “American Hustle” presents to viewers is this: Can movies that are this entertaining be considered serious? Typically, the answer to this question is “no”. David O. Russell is acknowledged as a very good director, but perhaps not as a great one. This is a mistake. Three of Russell’s movies, *The Fighter*, *Silver Linings Playbook* and *American Hustle*, which in some respects form a trilogy, have been nominated for Best Director Academy Awards, although none of them has won. ‘American Hustle’ is the equal of most of the movies that won an Oscar, but in a way, the movie is deceptively simple. ‘American Hustle’ lost to Cuarón’s ‘Gravity’, which is a gorgeous and spectacular movie. ‘American Hustle’ is equally spellbinding, but not because of its photography. Rather, it is captivating the way watching a figure

skater do quadruple loops is captivating. We can't believe our eyes, nor can we look away. David O. Russell is so good at what he does that he makes it seem effortless. Although it deals with serious themes, the fact that it is an intensely enjoyable movie is as deceiving, in a sense, as the grifters that it portrays. David Denby of the *New Yorker* writes, "Inside Llewyn Davis" and "Nebraska" are the current standards of what a serious Hollywood movie looks like. "American Hustle" offers so many easy pleasures that people may not think of it as a work of art, but it is. In the world that Russell has created, if you don't come to play you're not fully alive. An art devoted to appetite has as much right to screen immortality as the most austere formal invention." (Denby, 2013)

"American Hustle" is based loosely on a true storey. As Russell announces in the opening credits, "Some of this actually happened." The plot revolves around an FBI sting operation from the late 1970s called "Abscam" in which numerous American officials were convicted for taking bribes. The main characters are Irving Rosenfeld, a life-long conman (Bale), his wife Rosalyn (Lawrence), his partner Sydney Prosser (Adams), FBI agent Richie DiMaso (Cooper), and the mayor of Atlantic City, Carmine Polito (Jeremy Renner).

Everything in the movie moves quickly, from the dialogue to the plot to the camera. The movie opens on a shot of overweight and nearly bald Irving standing in front of a mirror crafting an elaborate comb over. The care that he takes in crafting his image is perplexing. From the first moment of the movie we are intrigued. Also, although we don't realize it at the time, we have been introduced to the key thematic element of self invention. Playing on the soundtrack is Duke Ellington, which we will later learn is an important part of the movie. The

camera pans from Irving to a room full of FBI agents watching monitors, which surprises and confounds us. Then Sydney enters and we see that there is sexual tension between them. In a few seconds, DiMaso comes in and we realize that there is a love triangle. DiMaso messes with Irving's comb over, which we intuit is crossing the line, and we are shown that DiMaso is probably the antagonist. The three characters walk down the hotel hallway to meet the mayor of Atlantic City for a sting operation in which they will offer him a bribe on camera. When they enter the room in which the mayor and his assistant are waiting, the first thing we notice is that they have crazier hair than Irving. We realize that Irving's elaborate hair is not a unconnected part of the movie. On the soundtrack, we hear Steely Dan's song "I'm a fool to do your dirty work" and we realize that the lyrics of the soundtrack are a reflection of what Irving is thinking. DiMaso, who we realize is in over his head, clumsily tries to bribe the mayor, who promptly leaves the room. The operation has failed.

The opening sequence is less than three minutes long, and yet we are completely captivated, aware of the main plot (the FBI sting operation), the subplot (a love triangle), the central themes of the movie, deception and self-invention, been shown that details like hair style and the soundtrack matter, and that the movie is going to be breathlessly fast moving, like a game of Three Card Monte. And yet, nothing about Russell's technique calls attention to itself.

After the opening sequence, the movie flashes back to Irving's youth. In a voice over that is reminiscent of Scorsese's *Good Fellows*, Irving explains to us that "I learned how to survive when I was a kid." We are about to learn his justification for being a grifter. The scene is a young Irving watching as his

father gets taken advantage of. Irving says to us, "I'd rather be on the taking side than the getting taken side any day of the week." We then see a scene of the young Irving breaking plate glass windows with rocks to drum up business for his father's glass business. Irving then tells us that he kept his father's glass business and also that he runs a chain of dry cleaning stores but also that he has a sideline business that sells fake and stolen art. Still in the flashback, we see Irving at a house party when Sydney walks into the room and catches Irving's attention. They bond over a love for Duke Ellington. The narration switches to Sydney as we see Irving sitting in a lawn chair, his enormous stomach hanging over his lap. Sydney explains, "He had this confidence to him. He was who he was." This comment introduces us to the paradox at the heart of the movie's theme about truth and identity. We ask ourselves why someone who "was who he was" would spend such a long time constructing his image in front of a mirror. This paradox at the center of life is a recurring theme in the movie.

The movie then flashes to Sydney's story and we see her dancing in a strip club. She says about this: "There was a boldness to it—but where would this boldness take me. I didn't know but I was going to find out." In Irving's voiceover, he says of Sydney admiringly, "She knew how to live with passion and style. She understood Duke Ellington."

The Ellington album that they listen to is the famous "Live at Newport" album from 1956 which is one of the great jazz recordings in history. It features the 27 chorus Gonsalves solo that is one of the most revered of all time. A key point with this album that seemed to elude the film critics who reviewed "American Hustle" is that the Newport album is not only famous for its Gonsalves solo. It is also famous for restarting Ellington's career, which

had been flagging in previous years. In the classic American tradition, it is the album in which Ellington remade himself.

Sydney and Irving decide to work together in a con that promises to lend money to desperate people but actually just swindles their down payments. They are soon caught by the FBI and DiMaso, which brings us back to the present moment. Irving comments at this moment, "People are always conning each other to get what they want. We even con ourselves." And even though we know that we don't swindle people to quite the extent that Irving and Sydney do, it is impossible not to understand that what he is saying is basically true. How often are we truthful with ourselves?

Thirty minutes into the movie, well after an affair between Irving and Sydney has begun, we learn that Irving is married. Rosalyn is far from an afterthought and is written as well as any of the other characters. In fact, it may be one of Lawrence's best performances to date. Irving explains that he is in fact her mark, that she is the best con man of all. "She was my karma for how I had taken advantage of people." He is helpless in her power. "She was the Picasso of passive aggressive karate."

In a later scene, we meet FBI agent DiMaso's family for the first time and we realize that the cool operator that he presents himself as is far from the truth. He lives with an overbearing mother and a mousy fiancé who try to control his life. He too, it now becomes clear, is creating a façade out of thin air.

The movie moves with unwavering rhythm, but all of the main characters are fully drawn. It is a short movie full of plot twists, but by the end of it, we feel that we know the characters well. American

Hustle can be called many things, but perhaps most of all, it is a character study. When writing scripts, Russell and his co-writer Eric Warren Singer, begin with the characters. “I make movies based on characters that I love. The writing begins with writing the story from the perspective of each character.”

(Directors Guild, 2016) It is essentially a crime movie, but we understand each characters motivation. Russell’s dialogue is inspired, but it does not call attention to itself the way an Aaron Sorkin script does. The dialogue, like many other parts of the movie, seems effortless. The New York Times critic Manohla Dargis writes about Russell’s unique style. “...the director here is David O. Russell, who, more than any other contemporary American filmmaker, has reinvigorated screwball comedy, partly by insisting that men and women talk to one another. To that end, that chatter...is fast, dirty, intemperate, hilarious and largely in service to the art of the con ...” (Dargis, 2013)

The quickness of the dialogue and plot of the movie are matched by the cinematography. Russell often employs a steadicam to film his movies. One of the reasons that he uses a steadicam is that he generally has short shooting schedules. “Fighter” was shot in 32 days, “Playbook” in 33 days, and “Hustle” in 42. (Directors Guild, 2016) Without the need to set up tracks for dolly shots, use of a steadicam allows for more shooting each day. The use of a steadicam also contributes to the flow and rhythm of “American Hustle”. The camera is always moving. As Denby writes: “Working with the cinematographer Linus Sandgren, Russell takes the camera smoothly and rapidly through offices, restaurants, and parties, feeding one episode into the next, and linking them with movement or narration, like sustained musical phrases. In a few scenes, a character silently mouths the words of the song playing on the soundtrack, as if propelled by the beat in his head. The movie has

a ceaseless flow ; the music of greed never stops.

(Denby, 2013) Denby’s observation concurs with what Russell himself has said about the musicality of his cinematography. “Rhythm is everything.” (Directors Guild, 2016) He further noted that he often plays the soundtrack music on set so that the actors get a sense of the rhythm of the scene.

An important consideration with this movie is the title. Why is it *American Hustle*? Peter Bradshaw, writing in the British paper *The Guardian* wrote that the significance of the title is that it implies “irony and modernity”, at least in comparison to a movie that might be called *British Hustle*, which he correctly points out would be meaningless. But, of course, there is more to being American than irony and modernity. There is also the origin myth of the American Dream to consider. *American Hustle* is not an exhaustive study of what the dream. It is a character study of what it means to hustle. As David Denby points out, all of the characters in the movie are crazed with ambition (Denby, 2013), and what could be more American than that?

Charles Dickens remarked in his “American Notes for General Circulation” from 1842 that American individualism was so advanced that most Americans thought it foolish to ever trust another person. Either play or get played, Americans seemed to think. To trust anyone but yourself is to be a rube. This is very much in evidence with the protagonist Irving Rosenfeld. Also central to the American ethos is that we are what we make of ourselves, that we can control our own destiny. In the young America of 1776, this was much truer than it ever could have been in class rigid Europe. Whether there is actually upward mobility in America is a debatable topic. Many statistics show that it is in fact far from the truth.

The characters in *American Hustle* don't reflect on whether their dreams are true or not, but just strive. The word "hustle" itself is revealing if we consider its American meaning. In the Miriam Webster dictionary, its first meaning is "energetic" which comes close to the Japanese meaning of "tension". In sports, a coach will often tell his players to hustle, or work hard. One of the baseball players most famous for working hard, or hustling, was Pete Rose, who was also known as "Charlie Hustle". In 1989, when Rose was managing the Cincinnati Reds, he was banned from baseball for life for gambling on baseball games. This leads to the second meaning of "hustle" in American English (a meaning that existed long before Pete Rose) which is "a dishonest plan for getting money." The art of the hustle is, for good or bad, central to the American consciousness, as we can see from fictional characters like Gatsby to entertainers like P.T. Barnum to Donald Trump.

If we think of *The Great Gatsby* for a moment, reinvention without scruple is the main theme. In Fitzgerald's work, the central character's blind ambition is ultimately tragic. Gatsby's great wealth and showmanship in the end are insufficient to gain him the love of Daisy Buchanan. "American Hustle" and "Gatsby" differ in many obvious ways, and yet the similarities also stand out. Gatsby himself is a creation of his own imagination, much like Irving Rosenthal. It is in a technical sense, however, that the two works resemble each other. Both are written by very talented writers and then edited to the point where there is virtually no extraneous content. Both "Gatsby" and "American Hustle" flow from scene to scene without a pause.

The leftist writer Chris Hedges from Truth Dig (he also wrote for the New York Times for many years) writes scathingly of the American appetite for con men. He wrote that P.T. Barnum (of Barnum

and Bailey Circus) is the prototype of this strain of Americanism. An autobiography by Barnum, "Struggles and Triumphs," which was published in 1869, shamelessly details the sleights of hand and deceptions that made him very, very wealthy. He understood, as he wrote in the autobiography, that "the public appears disposed to be amused even while they are conscious of being deceived." This understanding underlies the popularity of entertainments such as professional wrestling and reality television shows, along with Fox News, all of which are premised on cons."

Hedges continues this line of thought to his description of Donald Trump, whom many people believe is not the billionaire he presents himself as but rather a hoax. Trump portrayed a business leader on "reality" television for many years and won over the American public. "Donald Trump is part of the peculiar breed Herman Melville described in his novel "The Confidence-Man," in which the main character uses protean personas, flattery and lies to gain the confidence of his fellow passengers to fleece them on a Mississippi River steamboat. "Confidence men," as Melville understood, are an inevitable product of the amorality of capitalism and the insatiable lust for wealth, power and empire that infects American society." (Hedges, 2018)

The character Irving Rosenthal in "American Hustle" is in fact a con man not unlike Barnum or Trump. However, the scale is quite different. Rosenthal, at least before he was trapped by the FBI, was a very small time player, simply plying his trade to make a living. It is perhaps for this reason that we can sympathize with him. Russell wrote the characters in "American Hustle" from the inside out, in a way that lets us know their humanity and leads us to think about honesty in a general way.

Russell's primary goal in making that movie was to create an entertaining movie. The movie explores serious themes, but as Denby wrote, the movie is a series of "astonishments". It is simply one of the most entertaining movies to come out in many years. As Russell said in a Directors Guild interview, "My holy trifacta is to have music, emotion and camera in a propulsion that makes you feel like you are breathing...I like movies that are exciting, that capture your attention, that offer things that are unexpected." (Directors Guild, 2016)

What makes "American Hustle" defensible as entertainment is that Russell does not glorify the criminal lifestyle. We do not wish to trade places with Irving Rosenthal. The story is not a tragedy like Gatsby, yet it is a critique of American society nonetheless. As an example of movie making craft, it is masterful.

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