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Movie Review: The Grifters (1990)

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## The Grifters (1990)

*The Grifters* (1990) is an award-winning Hollywood masterpiece produced by Martin Scorsese and directed by Stephen Frears; and to understand it better, its narrative structure and how it supports or opposes the plot, plus the manner in which the movie follows the equilibrium/disruption cycle have to be discussed. The narrative structure is another way of describing the story and plot.

The movie begins with a voiceover explaining that bettors at racetracks will intentionally bet high on certain horses to lower the odds and get more money. This gives us a rough imagination that the movie is all about gambling where Lily Dillon (Angelica Houston) works for Bobo Justus – a Baltimore gangster – who gets her do such bets on horse-racing matches. Lily Dillon is a veteran con. Lily wins the bet and collects the money before opening a concealed compartment in the trunk of her car and skims a couple of thousand dollars from the payoffs and hides it among the other money she has stolen from her boss – Bobo Justus. Lily obeys a call from one of Bobo's associates and goes to La Jolla, New Mexico for another horserace bet. Lily stops by Los Angeles to see Roy Dillon (John Cusack), her 25-year-old alienated son who works several small-time cons. Roy is so talented at conning guys that she tricks a bartender to give her change for \$20 instead of \$10. He does this by showing the bartender a \$20 note then cunningly switching it for a \$10. He is discovered by his marker who gives him a serious beating. While in agony, Roy remembers advice his friend, Mintz, a man who taught him introduced him to conning as a 'profession.' Roy stays in bed without treatment until his mother arrives.

The same night Myra Langtry (Annette Benning), Roy's girlfriend, stops by his house and the two have sex. Myra is also a grifter. The following day, Lily appears at Roy's home and

the two have a bad conversation, with Roy complaining about his mother staying silent on him for 8 years. However, every mother has a feeling for her son no matter what happened. Lily takes him to a medical center for hospitalization. This shows the life around Roy is built on gambling. His mother, girlfriend, and friends are all gamblers/cons who would get their hands dirty to get what they want – money. Roy leaves hospital and along with Myra returns to La Jolla.

When Roy and Myra have a disagreement about a certain conning plot, Myra accuses her boyfriend of having an incestuous relationship with his mother. Roy punches Myra in the face and she later vows to avenge such humiliation. As a result, she lets Bobo know that Lily has been stealing his money for a long time. Lily flees and Myra hunts her down. Myra gets shot in the face by Lily. Lily tries to make the body look as hers to suggest her death. Roy, upon trying to identify her, discovers the body is Myra's and not Lily's. Then, Roy finds Lily at his place trying to steal all his money. The two have a serious quarrel and Lily swings a suitcase at Roy and accidentally breaks a glass he was drinking from into his neck, cutting an artery. Lily steals the money and leaves her son to bleed to death.

*The Grifters* (1990) is a story about conning, sex, and murder and as the story develops, signs of anxiety start to appear. I mean the audience never knows what happens next. The plot is intriguing as it involves flashbacks that describe how past events are connected to the present. For instance, we learn that Roy was taught how to con by Mintz. A lot of things are left to the audience to judge. For example, it is not explained why Lily abandoned her son for 8 years. The boy was 17 when his mother left him, despite her knowing where he lived. This gives the plot a sense of suspense which is good in movies. The movie ends with Lily killing Roy and stealing all his cash, but we are not told what is going to happen to her considering that Bobo Justus is now fully knowledgeable about how massively Lily has been stealing from him. Will she end up with

torture, cigar wounds and a bullet to the head? Will she run away and never found by Bobo? Will Bobo forgive and continue to work with her? No one knows. Most probably, things will go bad for Lily.

Its plot has no narrator but a couple of scenes involve flashbacks that help us understand the story better. This; however, in one way or another promotes anxiety, panic and stress within the audience. The plot follows the disruption cycle as it generates fear, panic and anxiety. The fact that the fate of Lily at the hands of her aggressor – Bobo Justus – is not clear, the story leaves us in suspense. Lily appears to have killed her son unintentionally, but she left him to bleed to death. Before she swung that suitcase, she tried to seduce her own son and when Roy refuses to bend to her will, she tells him he is not her son. The story leaves us in the air due to lack of clarity about what is going to come up next. Being such a powerful man, Bobo Justus will definitely find Lily and kill her, but this is left to the viewer to decide.