

THE AVIATOR

Directed by Martin Scorsese

Produced by Sandy Climan, Charles Evans, Jr., Graham King, and Michael Mann

Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures

Released in 2004

An abundance of good acting is never enough. Some roles are more difficult to play than others, but good acting means the actors are forgotten and we only see characters. Similarly, digital animation can be a great asset, affording us a view of things little seen in older movies. But usually we did see them. They cost more to produce, and habitually looked good. And when did this strange predilection for animating lens flares begin? Lens flares, natural or artificial, take us out of a story and remind us we are watching a production. It's the same with mud on the lens during a stampede shot; sometimes it's necessary to tell the story, but why strive for a necessary evil? In *The Aviator* the animation is consistently poor. If only someone would re-introduce the reality of visuals made in-camera, not in a digital void.

The production design is convincing and beautiful to look at, the editing is daring, with jump cuts in the middle of conversations (in a style generally reserved for action movies) and cuts in the middle of dialogue. The score is serviceable, but Scorsese seems to betray a dissatisfaction with composer Howard Shore, even though he worked with him previously. The pair of test flight scenes are left to J.S. Bach. The fugue is effective until the engine fails in the second test run. We're given a hard out masked by the sound of the breakdown, but such a technique only works if the music sets up the shift—buoyant and triumphant to set up the shock of the breakdown, or static and neutral to ease the transition out of score. Bach can't be altered, so instead the director turns him off like a bothersome radio.

Martin Scorsese made a film like this before—the sparsely-scored *Raging Bull*, a period piece bio-pic with an inconclusive ending of the lead character talking to himself. The private implosion of a character is a re-occurring motif as well, best seen in his 1976 devastator *Taxi Driver*. However, Scorsese is capable of working with a broad range of themes and subjects, as the farcically entertaining *After Hours* (1985) attests. He is skilled, but he's a disappointing storyteller. The tragedy of *The Aviator* is not that Howard Hughes self-destructs, throwing away greatness. The tragedy is that he remains forever unfulfilled, blind to the great blessings he's been granted and deaf to the needs of others unless they can be met in the heady profits of high-octane capitalism. With either interpretation, the ending is appropriate—he faces his obsessions alone. The problem is that seeing Hercules fly does not qualify as a climax. Part of the problem is that a person's life, however interesting, does not follow the story arc around which a writer constructs a good story. A real-life character can generate a suitable climax, but only if a convincing theme, weaved through the film, is resolved; both his isolating selfishness and his neurotic obsessions are dealt with but result in no clear progression and reach no culminating apex. Yes, we see his relationships crumble, but it's not clear if only his paid help remain loyal—Hepburn and Gardner remain fond of him to the end. And his debilitating obsessions are neither conquered nor conquering. Seeing Hercules fly can be seen as a triumph of his single-minded focus and determination, but these are not neuroses.

So, while giving credit to the makeup artists and hairstylists, the acting is, altogether, outstanding, but this doesn't contribute anything—can't contribute anything—to a story that is periodically arresting but incohesive, with a theme and a climax that are only passingly related. The life of Howard Hughes is almost as interesting as the history of the country that birthed him. He was the beneficiary of talent and opportunity, entertaining obsessions that alternately inspired him and degraded him. His life makes for a good movie that just falls short, like its subject.