Why this dishonest portrait of a despicable figure?

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The Aviator, directed by Martin Scorsese, written by John Logan

The Aviator, directed by Martin Scorsese and written by John Logan, sanitizes, indeed idealizes, the life of American industrialist Howard Hughes (1905-76) in such a manner as to make it nearly unrecognizable. The facts about Hughes' activities, nearly all of them reprehensible, lie in the public record, but who will point to them and issue a protest?

The film treats approximately two decades of Hughes' life. We see Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) obsessively at work in the late 1920s on his costly and time-consuming World War I aviation film, *Hell's Angels*; pursuing various Hollywood beauties, including Katharine Hepburn (Cate Blanchett) and Ava Gardner (Kate Beckinsale); and attempting to pioneer new aircraft and set aviation records. The climax of the film, even as Hughes plunges into the initial stages of insanity, involves his conflict in 1947, as owner of Trans World Airlines (TWA), with giant rival Pan American and its political spokesmen in Congress.

DiCaprio, a gifted performer, is one of the film's few saving graces. Blanchett, generally an even more gifted performer, is not. Her performance, drawn from bits and pieces of Hepburn's screen persona, is shrill and unappealing. Is it not revealing that Scorsese could think of no other way of recreating Katharine Hepburn's private life than directing his lead actress to borrow unthinkingly physical and vocal mannerisms from various films? Such an approach, which leaves out studying the deeper, inner meaning of Hepburn's life and work, precludes the possibility of any genuine insight. Beckinsale is not credible as Ava Gardner. The effectiveness of the film's flying sequences cannot make up for a clichéd and predictable script in every other regard.

The filmmakers present Hughes as an heroic and essentially sympathetic, albeit eccentric, figure. Indeed, in public comments, Scorsese makes clear his admiration. In an interview posted on *romanticmovies.about.com*, the veteran director observes: "Howard Hughes was this visionary, was obsessed with speed and flying like a god above everyone else, [and] was as rich as one of the Greek mythical kings, King Croesus. But ultimately having to pay that price, too. I loved [Hughes'] idea of what filmmaking was. He became the outlaw of Hollywood in a way."

He continues: "This visionary who was obsessed with speed. Young, energetic, filled with wonder and excitement, not only with aviation but also of Hollywood and making big movies." And finally: "And at the same time, a man who wants to fly to the sun like Icarus. But his wings really are wax, ultimately."

Screenwriter Logan describes Hughes corporate battle with Pan Am as "a clear David and Goliath story because Pan Am, at the time, it was Tiffany's, it was the top of the game. And TWA was just a struggling little airline."

A god, a mythical Greek king, an outlaw, a visionary, Icarus, David versus Goliath. Aside from anything else, these comments reflect the prostration of contemporary filmmakers before wealth and power. As usual, they rely on the general public's low level of historical knowledge.

Howard Hughes is a legitimate subject for cinema. There are many potentially fascinating and even tragic aspects of his life. In undertaking such an effort, however, one would have to have at least one seriously critical bone in one's body.

The very structure of *The Aviator* is dishonest, whether consciously or not, and designed to conceal the essential truth about Hughes' life. It ends with his supposed public victory over his tormentors in Congress and the airline industry. What a telling and conformist decision!

Perhaps Orson Welles should have adopted the same strategy and ended *Citizen Kane* with the party held to celebrate *New York Inquirer* publisher Charles Foster Kane's triumph over his rivals at the *Chronicle*. Welles, however, had something else in mind: a criticism of the "great man." That colorful, lively party scene is followed soon after by the comment of Kane's assistant, Bernstein, "Mr. Kane was a man who lost almost everything he had." The film carries on and documents Kane's decline and fall.

If Logan (*The Last Samurai*, *Gladiator*, *Any Given Sunday*)—an admirer of Welles and screenwriter for *RKO 281*, the story of the director's legendary battle with newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst—intends *The Aviator* to be his *Citizen Kane*, he has failed badly. As I noted in a review of *RKO 281*, "*Citizen Kane*, made by someone *with left-wing political sympathies* (of which no hint is given in *RKO 281*), called into question aspects of the American dream and criticized a man who sacrificed principle and potential greatness on the altar of money and power."

Halting at 1947 falsifies Hughes' life, which 'flowered,' so to speak, in the Cold War and the postwar era in general. It avoids his role as a fanatical anti-communist, who purged his own studio, RKO, of left-wingers, and his campaigns against screenwriter Paul Jarrico and Chaplin's *Limelight*; his well-known links to the Mafia; his business and personal dealings with bloody dictators such as Cuba's Batista, the Dominican Republic's Trujillo and Nicaragua's Somoza; his sale of TWA for half a billion dollars and his subsequent bizarre retreat to Las Vegas; his alleged participation in an assassination plot against Fidel Castro; his multifarious and lucrative association with the CIA (according to a biographer, for example, in 1963 the US spy agency linked up with mob connections through a Hughes-connected firm "to support fascist governments in South America"); his profiteering during the Vietnam War (the same biographer describes Hughes Aircraft as "an adjunct ... of the American government"); his buying up of Republican and Democratic politicians alike ("I can buy any man in the world," he boasted); his especially intimate ties to Richard Nixon and his apparent role in the Watergate conspiracy; his drug addiction; and, of course, his descent into hypochondria, paranoia and, ultimately, total lunacy. One might legitimately describe Hughes as something of an American fascist type.

(In this light, the revelation made by biographer Charles Higham (*Howard Hughes: The Secret Life*) is relevant, that in 1938—within the time-frame of the Scorsese film, it should be pointed out—"he [Hughes]

had formed a secret partnership with [Swedish industrialist] Axel Wenner-Gren, one of his rivals as the world's richest man, the founder of Electrolux and the inventor of the modern refrigerator, who was a friend of Field Marshal Goering and an arch-negotiator behind the scenes, with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, for a permanent peace with Nazi Germany and a *cordon sanitaire* against the Soviet Union." Hughes, just to make the picture complete, was a lifelong racist and anti-Semite.)

Logan's approach is intriguing. What prominent individual's life could not be made to shine or at least improved markedly if all the unpleasant portions were subtracted? Why not a biography of Al Capone concluding in 1919 with the future gangster recently and happily wed, with a new child and working as an accountant in Baltimore? Or a life of Joseph McCarthy that finishes on a note of triumph, his first election victory in 1939, after campaigning tirelessly, as a judge in the Tenth Judicial Court in Wisconsin?

This is overstating the case, to make a point. Hughes had an independent career as an aviator, and he was 42 in 1947, not 20 like Capone in 1919, or 30 like McCarthy in 1939. Nonetheless, Hughes is not remembered today, nor should he be, primarily as an aviation innovator. Higham describes how, in the wake of Hughes' record-breaking world flight, the "Army Air Corps [forerunner of the Air Force] refused to do business with him; even though he was America's hero, the brass knew what a wretched businessman and spendthrift playboy he was, and that the planes he designed were useless for military purposes." Not a hint of this enters into Logan's script.

No doubt Hughes was brave or reckless (which sometimes led to other people's deaths), or perhaps both, and possessed of a certain flair. Moreover, he must have had certain endearing qualities, at least as a younger man, to interest someone as intelligent as Hepburn. However, the filmmakers' responsibility was to build up the most complex and detailed picture possible, taking into account every aspect of Hughes' life. This they have not done.

Hughes broke the most new ground not as an aviator, or a lover, but as a gangster-businessman—hostile to any government regulation of his businesses and, according to Higham, hating to pay a penny in taxes; bragging of his ability to bribe anyone, including entire governments; and associating, directly or through his underlings, with thugs like mobsters Johnny Roselli and Sam Giancana. Can it be entirely coincidental that a period which has witnessed the criminalization of the American political and corporate world produces a film such as this?

One doubts that this is Logan's or Scorsese's conscious purpose. Each may very well consider himself, for instance, an opponent of the Bush administration's policies. But these semi-intellectual elements, never having worked out a single critical social or political issue in a serious fashion, are decidedly vulnerable to noxious fumes emanating from the ruling circles. Reluctantly or otherwise, they resign themselves to what they see as inevitable, the domination of such figures. In reality, they are in awe of them. And here we discover a continuity with much of Scorsese's previous work, which, in the end, has romanticized the Mafia thug and turned him into a peculiar variety of American folk hero.

To make Hughes into a rebel on the basis of his conflict with Pan Am is absurd. There was nothing inherently progressive in his opposition to Pan Am's monopoly on trans-Atlantic travel. Indeed, although the film neglects to point this out, Hughes had become a wealthy man precisely through a virtual *monopoly* his father had secured over drill bit technology (for drilling for oil through deep layers of rock), a monopoly Hughes vigorously and ruthlessly sought to defend.

Nor was TWA some tiny, defenseless operation up against an overwhelming giant in Pan Am. In 1946 TWA had $57 million in revenues, against Pan Am's $113 million, American's $68 million, United's $65 million and Eastern's $42 million. With Hughes' personal fortune behind it, TWA hardly had its back to the wall. Hughes eventually sold his interest in TWA for more than half a billion dollars, making him one of the richest men in the world.

One can only add that the notion that Hughes, many times a multi-millionaire already by 1947, was 'bucking the establishment' by demanding to be cut in on the lucrative international air travel market is a concept worthy of the producers of Fox's faltering 'reality show,' "The Rebel Billionaire," featuring Sir Richard Branson of Virgin Atlantic Airways.

Hand in hand with the glorification of the gangster-industrialist goes the equally unsavory promotion of right-wing, populist anti-intellectualism, also an adaptation to the prevailing official political atmosphere. The crucial scene that Logan and Scorsese set in the Connecticut home of Hepburn's parents is ludicrous. At a dinner party, Hepburn's family and friends condescend to Hughes, ignore him and spout empty phrases about injustice and the plight of the poor. The filmmakers have nastily projected Tom Wolfe's "radical chic" back into the past, for the same vile purposes: to caricature any opposition to the existing order as the product of wealthy, hypocritical liberals.

Hepburn's mother is made to declare piously, "We're all socialists here," and Hughes says something to the effect that the dinner guests have no interest in money because they were all born into it. The clear implication, which the filmmakers do nothing to dispel, is that *he* was not. In fact, Hughes, orphaned at 18, inherited $871,518—or $9.4 million in 2003 dollars; by 1938, thanks to other people's astute management of Hughes Tool Co., he was worth $60 million (three-quarters of a billion dollars in today's money). He was a far wealthier man than Hepburn's father, a surgeon and urologist.

There is a reactionary logic to the film's ideological stance. In *Gangs of New York*, Scorsese portrayed the working class population of the old Five Points district of New York City, contrary to one's understanding of these things, as well as the historical record, as villainous, depraved and gleefully vicious. In his latest film, Scorsese takes a man who was genuinely villainous, depraved and willfully vicious and depicts him as a god, a visionary, a man who flew too close to the sun. And they will tell us that class interests and social pressures play no role in art!

It is not possible to make a serious film about American public life and a personality such as Hughes, who intervened extensively, for better or worse, over a period of decades in that public life, without weighing political events and social processes and drawing conclusions, without *knowing something*. One cannot make sense of Hughes simply on his own terms, as an individual abstracted from history. The filmmakers have tried to do this and the result is miserable.