

Letters on a review of Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator*

19 January 2005

The following is a selection of letters received by the World Socialist Web Site on David Walsh's review of The Aviator, "Why this dishonest portrait of a despicable figure?"

Thank you Mr. Walsh for the incisive review of Scorsese's *The Aviator*. As I watched the film halfheartedly, I felt frustrated the whole way through precisely because it seems to leave so much out. It focuses on only particular elements of his life and character without much background or complementary material. (The opening scene of him as a child, then immediately cutting to his directing *Hell's Angels*, sets this impression for the whole movie.) I felt that we were not getting the whole picture or even an honest one. I left the film bored, uninspired and disenchanted. I "knew" we were supposed to "feel sympathy" and "admiration" for Hughes but I had none. Also you hit the nail on the head with the scene with the Hepburn family and I was taken aback by Hughes' hypocritical statement.

There seems to be a trend in Hollywood movies as of late which is to take altogether repulsive individuals with numerous disorders who have made great contributions to the ruling classes, to praise their accomplishments, make light and sympathetic their unpleasant traits and to completely whitewash the despicable aspects of their lives that can't be covered up with mere window dressing. The viewer is meant to see that the accomplishment is great and noble (even if it necessarily isn't and is rather exaggerated), that their eccentricities and quirks are to be taken in stride, sympathized with and taken lightly, and leave the cinema with a positive impression. Yet if the viewers knew the whole story they would not hold the individual in such high ideal. Hollywood has often glorified and beautified psychopaths but lately it seems to be more prevalent.

Two films and individuals come to mind, the first one being *A Beautiful Mind*'s take on John Nash and, to a lesser extent, Kinsey. Nash's Game Theory, despite

whatever positive things it has led to, is still a method that seems to be the pinnacle of psychopathic rationalistic self-interest. A method that best allows someone to "win," regardless of the number of people they have to crush to get it. His personal traits have been documented on this web site. As for Kinsey, his work in the field of sex has been very beneficial to society. But there are certain traits in his work and his character that I find disturbing and possibly psychopathic. I have ignored the conservative critiques of his persona and work since they are clearly biased, unsubstantiated, hysterical and based on the fraudulent work of Judith Reisman (not to mention their own overwhelming fear and ignorance of sex). But some of his methods and conclusions leave a bad taste in my mouth.

MP

13 January 2005

Thanks for that very interesting and exhaustive review of Scorsese's last biopic. The most disturbing thing here is the fact that no one seems to bother about a whole part of Hughes' personality and history being skipped. We are not talking about top secret facts there, so the lack of reactions from the huge majority of the critics is shocking. But even sadder is the fact that this had to be expected, as you rightly said it.

I remember Pasolini stating in one of his books that Capitalism has succeeded where Fascism and Totalitarianism have failed, in creating a normalized and homogenized culture. This is not what we were supposed to get when we got that Berlin wall destroyed, was it?

TM

14 January 2005

France

This is a good, historically based review. Readers should also look up *The Guardian* U.K. Film Page article on Hughes, where the writer mentions the hero's '30s anti-Semitism, when he hoped that his plane would crash on MGM run by L.B. Mayer. Marty desperately wants

that Oscar even if it involves betraying his earlier potential.

TW

13 January 2005

I just finished reading your review of Martin Scorsese's newest film about Howard Hughes and, baby, it's a classic! It had me falling on the floor, weeping with laughter.

I love your idea of doing a biography and arbitrarily stopping at a certain point in the subject's life. ... Hughes at 42; Capone at 20. ... Why not Jesus H. Christ just after the Senior Prom?

Back in the 1980s, Studs Terkel interviewed the modern-day equivalent of a turn-of-the-century "robber baron." Studs asked him: "Does that bother you, being compared to a Gilded Age robber baron?" To which our boy replied: "Oh no, not at all." Quite the contrary, he was quite delighted to be compared with such people!

"Wouldn't that be great if they spoke of me that way," he went on to say. The virtuousness of ambition and hard work, at last, rewarded.

And a self-made man at that. Not like some of these celebrities who hardly work at all for such coveted glories; e.g., noted author and now, I believe (or was I dreaming this?), wildly popular TV personality—John Gotti's daughter. Watching from *The Great Beyond*, I can imagine the Teflon Don beaming with pride. (I forget, is it pride that comes first or a fall?)...

Getting back to why I brought up the robber baron point, it seems to me as though this is the type of fellow Martin Scorsese is. He obviously likes the idea of being associated with Mafia movies, so why when it comes to a fellow who "really was" involved with the Mafia (like, up the kazoo!), why shouldn't he completely ignore that part of Hughes' life? ... It's only logical. Show biz logic! Is there any other kind?

I recall another interview Studs Terkel did, this one appearing in his book, *Hard Times*—that of multimillionaire Clement Stone. Evidently the Depression was very good to Stone; however, after a while Studs interrupted our boy's fond memories, interjecting the following perhaps incidental thought. ... "But what about the hard times others were experiencing," Studs asked, "how did you feel about that?" To which Stone replied: "Why dwell on unpleasantness?"

And so, voila!, a sanitized Howard Hughes. The Great Communicator: Ronald Reagan. A Great and Courageous Leader: George W. Bush. A Worthy Opponent: John Kerry.

Why not? If Johnny Ray, who I believe was a heroin addict, can play a priest in "There's No Business Like Show Business," and in doing so look upon Marilyn Monroe in that movie without an iota of lust (no mean feat)—why pick on poor Howard? Why should his biographical movie legacy be besmirched in any way? Why dwell on unpleasantness?

TF

14 January 2005

I wish to commend you on your superb review of *The Aviator* which touched upon many of my concerns as I was watching the picture. On a more superficial note, I would add that Scorsese is clearly celebrating self-indulgent Hollywood filmmaking by treating the disastrous production of *Hell's Angels* (a terrible talkie with admittedly amazing aerial work) as a triumph for one renegade artist's uncompromising vision. It was troubling that Scorsese and Logan found no ironical links to Hughes producing this \$4 million movie during the early stages of the Depression when most studios were having to dramatically cut budgets. Perhaps Scorsese is trying to justify his own overproduced and overbudgeted filmography and the arrogance of current Hollywood production spending?

Some disturbing statistics: *Hell's Angels* would have cost \$45.75 million in 2004 dollars (source: Consumer Price Index). *The Aviator*, which apparently cost \$110 million to make, would have cost \$9.62 million in 1930 ... or nearly two and a half times that of Mr. Hughes' epic. Is further comment necessary?

MA

18 January 2005

Washington DC



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