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Lots can be said for *The Aviator* as entertainment, though not much for it as edification. John Logan's witty yet shallow script suggests we'll learn something significant about the psychology of Howard Hughes (1905-'76), but it doesn't deliver.

Logan and Scorsese held my attention for all 169 minutes—through the comic extravaganza

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ardo DiCaprio) on his first talkie (1930 *Hell's Angels*), the spectacle of his building and flying planes while romancing all the pretty ladies in sight, and his intrigues as he defies and outwits corporate entities larger than his own, such as MGM, TWA, and the U.S. government. But then the movie concludes with Hughes repeating the phrase "the wave of the future" like a broken record, and I couldn't figure out whether Logan and Scorsese were trying to illustrate a Hughes tic I hadn't heard about, evoke the specter of future multicorporate takeovers, or simply distract the audience from its questions.

The movie starts off on the wrong foot by offering a scene of young Howard standing naked in a tub in an ornate living room while his mother sponges him down and teaches him how to spell *quarantine*, warning him about the horrors of typhus and "the colored." It's as if Logan and Scorsese wanted one pithy bit of psychological backstory that could account for the multifaceted craziness of Hughes as a grown-up, including his phobia of germs, his paranoia, and his reclusiveness. This is the only glimpse of his boyhood offered, and it's less an explanation than a cover for the absence of one, a ruse to keep us from asking too many questions. It's also a symptom of a cinephiliac malady that I'll call an acute case of Rosebud—a need to make numerous visual and stylistic references to *Citizen Kane* even though they cloud more issues than they clarify.

I can guess how these references might have been rationalized. It's well-known that Orson Welles considered making a film about Hughes before he opted

for William Randolph Hearst; some of the details are in Welles's autobiographical *F for Fake*. But it's wise to remember that Kane is a fictional character and that the use of the word "Rosebud" as a key to unlock the mystery of his life is undermined in the film's final speech: "I don't think any word can explain a man's life." Using quarantine as if it were an equivalent of Rosebud, even in passing, is a sign that this movie is more interested in pop mythology than in getting to the bottom of any character, real or fictional.

Admittedly, keeping audiences from asking too many questions is one way of defining entertainment, and for the most part



*The Aviator*

Scorsese does succeed as an entertainer. If we accept, contrary to some biographies, that Hughes's romantic involvement with Katharine Hepburn was a major part of his life, we're primed for one of the film's most nuanced achievements in pop mythology and can sit back and enjoy Cate Blanchett's crafty impersonation and Logan's hilarious dialogue for her. ("I adore the theater," she says. "Only alive onstage. I'll teach you. We'll see some Ibsen. If the *Republicans* haven't outlawed him by now. You're not a Republican, are you?") And even if we can't believe quite as readily in Kate Beckinsale as Ava Gardner, her

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character's maternal sweetness is still touching.

Similarly, Scorsese's climactic treatment of Hughes crash-landing his XF-11 plane in Beverly Hills—after scraping off the tops and sides of buildings—is a spectacular and highly suspenseful bit of bravura filmmaking that works best if we can overlook how people other than Hughes were affected. As Michael Atkinson notes in the *Village Voice*, "It's hard not to wonder who else was hurt or killed in that crash, but their names are apparently lost to or bought out of history." I wondered the same thing, and by not taking up the question Scorsese

ultimately fails for me as an entertainer, though some will no doubt see the shock-and-awe crash as funny (as David Denby did). Others will be disturbed by the loose ends and reminded of our current tendency to overlook the casualties caused by "visionary" leaders.

*The Aviator* focuses on the early adulthood of Hughes—"during his scrappy years from the late 1920s to late 1940s," as one piece of infotainment puts it, "when he fought the Hollywood establishment and pushed bounds on sex and violence in film, dated parades of starlets, and oversaw creation of the world's biggest and fastest

planes." I was disappointed that it stopped just before Hughes took over the RKO studio and revealed contradictory aspects of his right-wing politics. He assigned several RKO directors a film called *I Married a Communist* in the late 40s and early 50s as a test of their patriotism, figuring that anyone who turned the project down was automatically suspect. Yet he also protected a leading Hollywood radical, Nicholas Ray, from being blacklisted so that Ray could patch up several Hughes features. But my ideal Hughes biopic isn't Scorsese's, which, as the title suggests, is mainly about the man's obsession with planes—and

about the wealth, power, and glamour of the youthful Charles Foster Kane.

A more charitable reading of this movie's thematic thrust might say it broaches the mystery of how a dysfunctional obsessive managed to accomplish as much as he did, beyond what his billions bought him. This reading might even fit in with the *Kane* references insofar as the enduring popularity of *Citizen Kane* probably has more to do with a worship of power—Welles's and Kane's—than with an exploration of the title hero's personal failings.

But by and large I think this movie's chief function is to give

Scorsese an opportunity to indulge in the pleasures of big-time filmmaking and to treat the audience to a heady dose of glamour—knocking our socks off with period re-creations of the Cocoanut Grove, Grauman Chinese, and two-strip Technicolor. All that's justification enough for any entertainment, and on this level *The Aviator* does even better than most of Hughes's own movies (not including *Scarface*, which he had the good sense to let Howard Hawks direct). There just isn't a lot to chew on once it's over. If you ignore most questions, you don't wind up with many answers. ■