

# The Aviator (2004)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V-2 ; L-3 ; S/N-4

*Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.  
Ecclesiastes 2:10-11*

Director Martin Scorsese shouldThe Aviator be flying high in this engaging film based on the life of Howard Hughes. Although he was a wealthy industrialist, filmmaker, and society ladies man, Hughes thought of himself first as an aviator, hence the title chosen by Scorsese and scriptwriter John Logan. Even though he was the head of the tool company inherited from his father, Hughes, as we see, often chose to be his own test pilot, a practice that was to cost him dearly. For those who remember Hughes, if at all, as the paranoid millionaire, long-finger-nailed recluse who kept his own urine stored in hundreds of milk bottles, this film, based on his youthful years in Hollywood and the airline industry, will come as quite a revelation.

At the very beginning we are set up for Hughes' later erratic behavior by the scene in which Hughes' mother is scrubbing and instructing him how germ laden the world is. It is a scene that will be repeated later in the film, apparently the filmmaker's interpretation of why the adult Hughes became so obsessed with cleanliness and the threat of infections. We then jump to the year 1927 and Hughes' struggle to complete his WW 1 aviation film HELL'S ANGELS. He has just hired an executive to run his Hughes Tools, and now he is concerned that the planes in the cloudless California skies seem to be moving too slowly. He then realizes that it is because there is nothing against which to compare the speed of their motion. He needs clouds, so, true to character, he hires a professo, expert in weather, to predict when he can expect them so that he does not have to keep his expensive film crew on hand every day.

In the meantime, Hughes seeks out still two more movie cameras (he already has 24!) from the head of the rival studio, but mogul Mayer turns him down. A series of events arise, including the advent of sound which Hughes rightly sees spells the end of silent films, so five years and several million dollars later, the film is finally premiered. To the disappointment of his foes, the film is a big success, insuring Hughes' stay in Hollywood. He develops a relationship with actress Katherine Hepburn, and after a break-up, later with Ava Gardner. (The scene in which Hughes makes a fool of himself with Hepburn's snobbish New England family is very telling.) All along, Hughes' deep involvement in the rise of aviation, both in the development of new planes and in the business of buying and running the TWA airline, is shown. He is as brash in this field as he is in the production of films.

What Hughes might have achieved had he not been plagued by the mental breakdowns he suffers we will never know. His giant, would-be transport plane, no longer needed when WW 2 ends, sits in its massive hanger, an object of scorn, the press

dubbing it "The Spruce Goose" because as a prototype it was constructed of wood rather than metal. Thanks to the loving attention of Ava Gardner, Hughes, now totally cutting himself off from the world because of his obsessive disorders, rallies in order to go to Washington DC to defend himself against the attacks of an unscrupulous Senator Owen Brewster. The latter, allied with a major campaign supporter, the head of Hughes' rival Pan American Airways who wants to freeze TWA out of the lucrative routes to Europe. The climactic scene in which Hughes faces down the Senator and exposes his devious plans is a wonderful tribute to the spirit of the man who had always sought to beat the odds.

Scorsese, as always, meticulously evokes the age of the different periods—from the 1920s through the 1940s. His cast is outstanding, with Leonardo DiCaprio effectively depicting the brash gatecrashing Hughes in his 20's through the middle-aged recluse fearful of even shaking hands lest he become contaminated. Cate Blanchett is right on target with Katharine Hepburn's speech pattern and her mode of walking—surely we will see her name among the Oscar contenders, along with DiCaprio's and Scorsese's! And Alan Alda, after a great career of playing such nice guys as Hawkeye, seems bent on a second stage of playing mean and nasty villains. His Owen Brewster is the epitome of the sleazy politician we think of when the subject of the nation's capital and Congress comes up.

Hughes' life and career could have been a case in point for Koholeth, an example of a man "chasing after wind." I wish he could have arrived at Koholeth's conclusion, as spelled out in the words that conclude Chapter 2 of his work: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is

vanity and a chasing after wind.” Given the wonderful things that Hughes accomplished during the first half of his life, and the horrible misery of his later years, dare we say that it would have been better had he perished in one of his airplane crashes?

## **For Reflection/Discussion**

(Note: this might contain several spoilers, so read this after you see the film.)

1) Despite his wealth and privileged position as the owner of the Hughes Tool Co., how is Hughes an outsider? At what points does the movie show this?

2) What does Hughes gain from his flying? How is this shown in the scene in which he takes Kate Hepburn up in his plane? If you fly, what do you gain from it—a sense of freedom, of transcendence?

3) What does the film show that Howard contributed to aviation? Were you surprised at this?

4) What do you think of the comment, “Howard, we’re not like other people. Have to be careful not to let people in, lest they make us freaks.” How does Hughes carry this out in his life?

5) How does the scene of the disastrous dinner at the Hepburn estate prepare us for his break-up with Kate? And yet how does Hughes protect Kate later on?

6) How is Ava Gardner’s (Kate Beckinsale) visit to the walled off Hughes a moment of grace—especially after the way he had treated her?

7) What is the relationship of Juan Trippe (Alec Baldwin), CEO of Pan Am, with Sen. Ralph Owen Brewster? Do you think things have changed much in Washington since then? What do you think of Hughes’ defense—how were his dealings with the government

victimized by circumstances?

8. What do you think of the climactic scene of the flight of the Hercules? How is this a fitting way to conclude the film? Hughes was undoubtedly a smart man, but in the light of Ecclesiastes, do you think he was a wise man?