

2004 Movies in Review:

Well now, 2004 wasn't a banner year for great movies, but there certainly were some good ones. As usual, I didn't get to see as many as I wanted to, but here are my thoughts since awards' season is coming up. In no particular order, they are...

For movies, I thoroughly enjoyed "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind." The chemistry between Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet felt natural and spontaneous. And, the script by Charlie Kaufman was, as usual, unpredictable but fun.

Speaking of chemistry, the road buddy movie "Sideways" was unmatched. Not only were the two male friends Paul Giamatti and Thomas Haden Church wonderful, but the two women that enter their respective lives-Virginia Madsen and Sandra Oh-were equally to the task. This comedy needs to be seen again. There are some who didn't like this wine filled feast, but that's just sour grapes. No sour grapes here. My, what happens when the right script comes around for the "right" actor or actress.

"The Aviator," directed by the incomparable Martin Scorsese might finally win the beloved director an Academy Award. Not his best film, but good enough to achieve a nomination, and perhaps a victory. And, just check out the marvelous performance by Cate Blanchett as Katharine Hepburn. She just sizzles!

And Pedro Almodovar's daring "Bad Education" was a Hitchcock like filled ride throughout. Though the subject matter might be difficult for some, the director's punch was unexpected and irresistible. He puts us in a spell and casually reveals his wicked intent. It was in Spanish with subtitles.

Director Jean-Pierre Jeunet's lovely WWI epic love story "A Very Long Engagement" with Audrey Tautou had indelible cinematography. Countering the beautiful pastoral scenes of France, with the battle scarred and ruined fields of war, Jeunet fills our senses. Essentially, a love story, but a story well told. And, what's wrong with that? In French with subtitles.

A movie worth seeing because historical impact and of the lovely images of South America was "The Motorcycle Diaries." It was directed by Walter Salles whose Brazilian "Central Station" helped open a wonderful new light on gritty Brazilian film making. "The Motorcycle Diaries" is about a young rebel Che Guevara, whose view of the world and the Americas changed forever after this trip. In Spanish with subtitles.

There were some near misses for me. Johnny Depp is unbelievably spectacular in the gentle "Finding Neverland." Not once, for a moment did I think it was Depp, but the real person J. M. Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan. He is something. But the movie never captured me entirely.

"Kinsey" was a near miss. Unlike, Depp's performance, Liam Neeson as Dr. Alfred Kinsey, never quite got out of his persona. And, while some applaud Laura Linney's performance, as the good doctor's wife (hey I loved her in "You Can Count on Me" for which she should have won an Oscar), this role is rather bland.

"The House of Flying Daggers" had amazing choreographed fight sequences. They are incomparable, and the use of color was amazing. Look for an Oscar nomination here in art direction and cinematography, perhaps even wins. Beautiful to look at, but unfortunately, the movie's characters did not engage me, and it lacked the political and philosophical impact of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon." That film was unique and clicked on all cylinders.

Mike Nichols' "Closer" just seemed unnecessary. It seems that Nichols' has a thing for "men" that won't grow up and face responsibility. Unfortunately, in this film, neither do the woman. Just check out Julia Roberts wooden performance here. A senseless remake of his stellar 1971 "Carnal Knowledge." At least that movie had slightly likeable buffoons.

And finally "What the Bleep Do We Know" tried to be the thinking man's version of "My Dinner With Andre." This movie interviewed several "leading" scholars on the meaning of life and questioned our own perceptions. Rather interesting, but overblown with special effects and too many topics to digest.

Best chemistry: Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet in "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" tied with Paul Giamatti and Virginia Madsen in "Sideways."

Best script: Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor for their comedy "Sideways" in a narrow win over Charlie Kaufman's comedy/romance "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" and David Magee's sublime "Finding Neverland."

Best actress: Too many I didn't see in this category.

Best actor: Ditto.

Best supporting actress: How can you go wrong with either Cate Blanchett in "The Aviator" or Kate Winslet in "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind?" Hey, and don't forget Kate Winslet in "Finding Neverland" either. And what about Virginia Madsen's touching and noble performance in "Sideways" that is one of the few women in this world that finds Paul Giamatti's character loveable? I'm still pulling for Cate.

Best supporting actor: Just what would "Sideways" be without Thomas Haden Church?

Best director: Martin Scorsese (It's about time, baby!)

Best cinematography: "The House of Flying Daggers"

Best foreign film: "Bad Education"

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