



FACT SHEET

Week beginning 12 February 2007

Media, Film and Technology Summertime delights

Summertime is such a great time for the movies! Because of the holidays there's more time available to go and see them and, because the Academy Awards are just around the corner, the summer always brings with it a smorgasbord of major award contenders.

The highlight of this summer has been the release of a movie which is so outstanding that it is destined, I believe, to become a milestone in movie-making history. The movie is called *Babel*. It's an epic movie that is so well-crafted and so engrossing that it forces you to think back many years if you are trying to find other movies with which to compare it. I can't think of anything in recent years that comes anywhere near it. I'll talk more about *Babel* later, but first I'll take you on a quick guided tour through some of the other movies which I've seen this summer.

Some have been just good fun. I'll begin with *Flushed Away*, an animated movie from the creators of *Wallace and Grommit*. This is a good little adventure story about a house-mouse who happens to be flushed down the toilet and discovers that the sewers of London are another world, inhabited by other mice and a variety of strange creatures. It's an entertaining romp and I gave it three stars.

A French situation comedy called *The Valet* is also an effective chuckle producer. It's about a very ordinary guy who is given the enviable task of pretending to be the boyfriend of a sensationally beautiful model. This improbable arrangement is engineered by a wealthy businessman who is in fact having an affair with the model but wants to throw his suspicious wife off his trail. It's simple isn't it? And you can imagine how it can all go wrong. *The Valet* is good fun and I gave it three stars.

Another of the good fun movies is *Night at the Museum*. This is very much a vehicle for comedian Ben Stiller and, while it doesn't deliver the guffaws that Stiller's turn in *Meet the Parents* did a few years ago, it's nevertheless a good piece of entertainment. The movie has some marvellous special effects – such as a dinosaur skeleton which comes to life – and some nicely-tuned cameo performances from Robin Williams, and old-stagers Dick Van Dyke and Mickey Rooney. I gave it three stars too.

Then, in a quite different category, there's *The Holiday* – a romantic comedy. The main performers in this movie are Cameron Diaz and Jude Law, ably supported by Kate Winslet and Jack Black. This is an interesting movie so I would urge you not to be put off by some of the dismissive comments you might have read about it. Sure it's got its share of knockabout fun and the romantic parings-off are somewhat improbable. However, there are also deeper veins of truth explored in this scenario such as the problems that time and space and even the fragility of life itself pose to romantic connections. This effective combining of themes that are sometimes funny and at other times quite touching should not surprise us when we realise that it's a Nancy Meyers movie. It was Nancy who, again as writer and director, explored similar themes in 2003 in the delightful *Something's Gotta Give* which featured Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton. *The Holiday* is worth a good three and a half stars.

Now for a couple of Oscar contenders. Firstly, Helen Mirren in *The Queen*. If ever a movie belonged to its star this is surely it. Mirren snuggles so comfortably into the royal head scarf and tweed skirt that, for much of the movie, you have to remind yourself that you are not watching a kind of reality-documentary about a few crucial days in the life of the royal family. *The Queen* is a rather unusual movie in that we are all quite familiar with the plot before we go to see it. It's about the reluctance of the Queen, the *real* Queen, to authorise a state funeral for Princess Diana. What we *don't* know, of course, is the details of the debates which occurred over this issue behind closed doors in the royal household. And it's on this that the plot of the movie turns – speculating about the dilemma in which the Queen found herself and how it was resolved. It's all very well-written drama – if a little unexciting. Where the movie comes to life is in Helen Mirren's depiction of the Queen herself. It's a splendid performance. Mirren goes far beyond what could easily have been a simple caricature. Rather than hiding behind a royal mask, she cleverly finds ways of creating a *character*. It may not be the real Queen but Mirren succeeds in depicting a personality who has humanity and vulnerability. Helen Mirren will walk away with the Oscar for best actress. As a movie I thought *The Queen* rated three stars.

And then there's *Babel*.

Some way into this movie we meet an American couple, Richard and Susan, played by Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett, on a bus tour holiday in Morocco. As they sit in the heat of a grubby roadside stop-over Susan's face and body language effectively tells us that she would rather be somewhere else. Eventually she murmurs the question – almost to herself : “Why did we come here?”

It's a phrase that reflects the essence of this powerful movie: the issue of the manner in which our lives can be changed profoundly and irrevocably by the seemingly simple choices we all make from day to day.

The movie explores this theme in four separate stories which take place on three different continents. All the stories unfold over the same period of about forty-eight hours and all are connected despite being separated by vast distances and – in line with the title of the movie – differences in language, cultures and, ultimately, communication.

But communication is not a problem for the director of this movie, Mexican-national Alejandro Inarritu, who unfolds his work before us with great skill and certainty of touch. It's like watching an intricate tapestry being unrolled before our eyes.

Inarritu depicts each of the four stories with gritty clarity and skilfully invests them all with an ever-present sense of dread, a feeling that something is about to go wrong. This constant underpinning of dramatic tension is one of the triumphs of this movie and it rivets your attention to the screen.

I suppose you could categorise the movie as a thriller although this description seems somewhat inadequate. To compare it with others I found myself thinking back to elements of the best work of Hitchcock, Antonioni, Altmann and Francis Ford Coppola. *Babel* is an outstanding achievement in movie –making and I gave it top marks – a rare five stars. If it doesn't get the Oscar for the best movie there is no justice!

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