



TRANSCRIPT

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Film Reviews - Iron Man and The Painted Veil

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The very best movies have the capacity to carry us away with them to a different place and time. I think that's why movies have always been such a popular form of entertainment. If they are effective, they provide us with a magic carpet which can take us to places which are far away from the routines of our humdrum lives. They can delight or terrify, sadden or amuse. It's called escapism, and it can come to the screen in many different forms.

The two movies I will look at today provide very effective magic carpet rides - but to totally different worlds. The movies are both high quality productions but they are as different as chalk and cheese. One of them, *The Painted Veil*, is a finely-crafted love story set in 1920's China while the other, *Iron Man*, is an exciting adventure story based on a comic book superhero.

The Painted Veil is a richly-detailed period piece presented in a manner which recalls Merchant Ivory productions from the 1980's such as *Heat and Dust* or *A Room with a View*.

It is very much a literary and theatrical piece which draws its appeal from well-written dialogue and finely-tuned acting performances. The movie is based on a novel by W. Somerset Maugham and this provides the film with a re-assuring stamp of authenticity. Maugham's travels in Asia between the wars were a great source of inspiration for him and it's nice to bring to mind an image of this urbane writer comfortably settled in his favourite corner of the Palm Court at Singapore's Raffles Hotel while he formulates the details of this story. The novel also provided the basis for an earlier movie in 1934 starring Greta Garbo. I haven't seen this version but I don't imagine that they bothered to travel to China to film it.

However, in the latest film, the location features as a prominent "third player" and much of the action takes place in a part of China where the landscape consists of placid lakes and broad rivers set against a breathtakingly-spectacular backdrop of hump-backed mountains. I was not quite sure what the title of the movie - *The Painted Veil* - referred to, but the depiction of this landscape - beautifully rendered through a soft, sub-tropical haze, conjures-up notions of delicate Chinese silk paintings. As with a Chinese painting, the story too, appears on the surface, to be deceptively simple.

In London, a young doctor, Walter, and a flighty socialite, Kitty, marry in haste and move to China. In the social whirl of colonial Shanghai the tearaway Kitty soon tumbles into an affair with an English diplomat, Charles, who turns out to be a cad and a bounder. Kitty's stolid husband discovers the affair and sets out to punish her by insisting that she accompany him on a dangerous posting into the Chinese hinterland where he is to try to stem an outbreak of cholera.

Will these testing circumstances bring them back together or force them further apart? Will they find redemption or destruction in a beautiful environment where the people are ravaged by a deadly disease? You'll have to go and see the movie to find out. But it's worth the visit. The story requires powerful performances to bring it to life and Naomi Watts and Edward Norton handle the leading roles with riveting skills enabling us to gain a perfect understanding of the complex motivations of their characters. Watts was superb in *King Kong*, playing the love-interest of the great ape with a mixture of vigour and compassion. In *The Painted Veil* she is required to portray a woman who is forced by circumstances to completely re-assess her life.

Watts delivers an engrossing performance, marvellously demonstrating the nuances of this enormous change. Edward Norton is also perfectly cast as her husband – a ticking time-bomb of intensity setting out to bring his straying wife to heel with the same level of concentrated resolve that he employs in tackling an epidemic of a deadly disease.

If you have liked Merchant Ivory-style movies in the past you will not be disappointed by *The Painted Veil*.

I gave it four stars.

Now *Iron Man* is a completely different kettle of fish and, although it too is an excellent movie with a gripping storyline, I would tip that it would not be the ideal cup of tea for most people who take delight in *The Painted Veil*. *Iron Man* is based on a character introduced in a comic book in 1963. He's a superhero dedicated to fighting for truth and justice, yes, but what about the "American way"? Well, not so much, and I'll say more about that later.

And this is just one of the characteristics that makes *Iron Man* different from his famous precursor – Superman, the Man of Steel. *Iron Man* is a much more complex and intriguing character. He's a superhero attuned to our more analytical times. Don't get me wrong though, *Iron Man* is no sensitive new-age guy. Not by any means. He doesn't just knock out the baddies with Batman-style sock, biff and whammo. *Iron Man* simply kills them, employing a range of lethal weaponry that would make a terrorist's eyes water. And, in the movie – an up-date on the 1960's comic – it's Afghan terrorists who, inadvertently, are responsible for the initiation of *Iron Man*.

The man who ultimately creates *Iron Man* is a wealthy American weapons manufacturer called Tony Stark who is kidnapped by the terrorists and held captive in a cave in Afghanistan. Stark is a technology genius so he sets about devising his escape from the clutches of the terrorists and ... well you'll have to see the movie to see what happens next. And, take my word for it, if you like a good adventure yarn with a dash of conspiracy theory thrown in, you will enjoy *Iron Man*.

And what about Superman's code of honour and, in particular, the "American way"? Well Tony Stark, alias *Iron Man*, becomes a bit disillusioned about some aspects of the "American way" – in particular, illicit weapons trading – and, given that he's made his money as a weapons manufacturer - this leads to some conflict within his character. This development, together with a number of other nifty twists and turns in the plot, lends bite and interest to the story and makes the entire production a much more satisfying experience than its comic book origins might have suggested. In addition, one of the things that makes *Iron Man* more interesting than many of his other superhero mates is that he really is vulnerable. Essentially he's just a guy in a clever suit of armour.

Aussies will recognise some distant parallels with our own folk hero Ned Kelly - and we know what happened to *him* in the shootout at Glenrowan.

Iron Man, the movie, depends heavily on computer generated imagery. It's one of those movies where the names of the clever cgi people take up at least half of the closing credits. And the effects are truly marvellous, creating generally seamless transitions between real-life images and those generated by computer. *Iron Man* is a very satisfying action-adventure movie and I gave it four stars.

A built-in little trailer, at the end of the closing credits, suggests that we can expect to see a sequel sometime in the future. I'll be looking forward to that.

'Til then I'll see you in the back stalls.

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