“Flaccid” is not a word I use often, but it works wonderfully as a way of describing many aspects of *Hell’s Angels*. The plot has no form, the actors have no focus, the action sequences go on too long, the crises are melodramatic and trivial. You care about none of the characters, and thus are not interested in the outcome of the action sequences.

It’s the film of a very rich, talentless amateur – and, if the rumours about the involvement of Edmund Goulding and James Whale in its filming are true, an amateur who could infect his assistants with his own lack of ability. When you think about it, though, several of Whale’s movies, especially *Frankenstein* and *Journey’s End*, are afflicted with the kind of camp semaphore-acting on display here. What the flaccid Ben Lyon is allowed to do here, the flaccid Colin Clive and Anthony Bushell get away with there, too. Stanislavsky hasn’t caught up with any of them, and neither has understatement.

It’s World War One. Two flaccid English brothers are at Oxford. One is a decent chap, the other a bit of a lad: except that they’re played by American actors who are at least five years too old to be at Oxford, and who make no attempt to disguise their American accents (the movie was re-shot with the advent of talkies, so in the first shoot their accents wouldn’t have mattered). They both join the RFC. They share an infatuation with a platinum blonde floozie (Jean Harlow – the only interesting personality and presence in the film). She betrays them with a drunken English officer, whom one of them punches in the face. But because they are so flaccid, you don’t care. Nothing seems to be at stake.

They have a flaccid German friend, who hates the idea of bombing London, and so directs his Zeppelin to go over a remote reservoir or lake, and drops all his bombs there. A squadron of English fighters catches up with the Zeppelin, and, to lighten her, first he is jettisoned, and then most of the crew are told to jump. Shouting “Für Kaiser und Vaterland!” they jump. The decision on the part of the flaccid German not to bomb London is foolish, and the decision to throw most of the crew out is foolish too, for the Zeppelin is downed anyway (the shots of her fiery descent are excellent – no models were used).

The brothers volunteer for a near-suicide mission to bomb a German ammunition dump; their plane is given German markings. They get drunk with two French floozies, and, being flaccid, nearly decide not to go on the mission – but change their minds at the last minute. The bombing of the dump is extraordinarily spectacular – not special effects again, just very, very big, very real explosions – and it makes the film almost worthwhile. Little boys of all ages will love seeing all those buildings really explode, and really mushroom up into the air. But then the brothers are involved in a complex dogfight between an English fighter squadron and the famous squadron of Manfred von Richthofen, and, being flaccid, are shot down.

The dogfight is almost as breathtaking as the bombing of the ammunition dump (for this again is all real – no models, and certainly, in 1929, no CGI); but Hughes was clearly so much in love with all the shots he got that he didn’t want to leave any of them out, and so the sequence goes on for about one-third too long.
The brothers are captured, and, rather than allow him to betray their side’s battle-plans, the good brother shoots the laddish brother, and is then executed himself. The plot and acting is informed by the same flaccidity as all the rest, and the only person you want to know what happened to is Jean Harlow, about whom you’re not told.

There’s no doubt who’s mainly responsible for the mess that is The Outlaw: “Directed and Produced by Howard Hughes” says the credit, reversing the normal order but still making an unambiguous statement of responsibility.

A leaden pace; inconsequential dialogue; ineptly choreographed gun-slinging and fisticuffs (one early example directed – so it’s said, though I can’t believe it – by Howard Hawks, who left the shoot after a fortnight); a script which pretends to wit but which has none; photography with none of the virtuosity we associate with Gregg Toland; music derived from Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique in the romantic bits, Bury Me Not On The Lone Prairie in the cowboy bits, and with muted trumpets and bassoons to nudge you, without success, into laughing at the supposed comic bits: this film has everything best calculated to make an audience lose interest. Add a performance from of all people Walter Huston (as Doc Holliday), which shows nothing save the actor’s wish that he were somewhere else, and you have a serious disaster.

Someone should have told Hughes that Thomas Mitchell was too old and fat to play Pat Garrett – after all, four years earlier he’d already been Scarlett’s dad in Gone With the Wind. He looks almost as embarrassed a professional as Huston. The only one who appears to like what he’s doing is the otherwise unheard-of Jack Beutel, a kind of tall, young, American James Mason, who plays Billy the Kid (actually he looks more like Richard Beymer). There seems to be the 1940s equivalent of a homoerotic subtext between the three men, either complimented or confused by two further triangulations – that between Holliday, Billy, and a horse, and that between Holliday, Billy, and Jane Russell. Both horse and woman shuffle or are shuffled from one man to the other. The woman finds it humiliating: the horse not.

A Sale of Two Titties was what the film was nicknamed, from the special bra Hughes designed to accentuate Russell’s boobs – but don’t buy the DVD just for their sake: I’m afraid the whole was a publicity stunt, and that they’re covered for the most part by a neckline of catholic decency. Ms Russell is a lot less intriguing, as personality and presence, than Jean Harlow was in 1929.

By the end of the movie things have become so lame and impotent so utterly unconvincing (so flaccid), that you suspect a joke is in progress – surely no-one can make films this bad. Garrett and Holliday have a shoot-out, but Holliday remembers just as he draws that Garrett was once his best friend, and doesn’t fire – so Garrett shoots him. Then Garrett persuades Billy to swap guns with him, so he can claim Holliday’s grave is Billy’s and that he shot Billy, while Billy goes off to start a new life. But he’s double-crossing Billy, and has filed the pin off his own six-shooters … then he finds that one of Billy’s six-shooters, which he has, is in fact one of his own filed-down six-shooters … so it goes on and on. Was Hughes taking the piss? Was he reweiring the western as camp comedy, bringing out the hidden gay agenda behind all those John Ford movies, as Tarantino did with Top Gun? I hope so. If not, he was an idiot.
Howard Hughes was, in reality, about the saddest person the USA ever produced. He may have had every air speed record in the book – he may have beaten Lindbergh’s transatlantic record – he may have had tickertape parades – he may have met Roosevelt, and may even have had Katherine Hepburn (as well as Randolph Scott, Cary Grant, Tyrone Power … the film doesn’t mention any of that): but he kept crashing, his greatest plane only flew one mile, he couldn’t keep Hepburn, and he went totally loopy, prey to a hygiene obsession, hiding from all except his Mormon bodyguards, letting his hair and nails grow long, running his own old movies, and wasting away until he looked like someone from Belsen.

Martin Scorsese doesn’t use that joke about *A Sale Of Two Titties* in his Hughes biopic, *The Aviator*. I don’t think he wants Howard Hughes trivialised. At one point in the film there’s a panning shot of an endless row of milk bottles, arranged in a perfectly straight line, each full to exactly the same level (you can tell it’s been done mathematically) with Hughes’s urine. I think Scorsese wants us to be awestruck at the thought of a man who was so obsessive-compulsive that he could arrange for such an installation to be created, and then live with it in his sitting-room.

I think he wants us to be awestruck at the thought of a man who could hire a leading meteorologist to find, anywhere in California, cloud formations against which he could film dogfights, and Zeppelins crashing. At the thought of a man who, seeing that his silent movie had been rendered obsolete by the advent of talkies, could re-shoot it with microphones from start to finish. At the thought of a man who always carried a new bar of lye soap in a carton in his pocket just in case he got a compulsive need to wash his hands. Is Scorsese holding this miserable monster up as a role model? As an example of the American Dream realised? Is he saying that you can’t live the Dream without going totally loopy? What commonsense tells us is ultra-sad, Scorsese wants us to think of as heroic. “The way of the future … the way of the future …” Hughes repeats in the final shot: but it wasn’t (or if it was, we were in for a bad time).

Leonardo di Caprio, though his body is too young for that of the middle-aged Hughes, looks paradoxically more like Hughes about the face as he ages. His commitment to and
identification with the part are exemplary. Stanislavsky and understatement have definitely caught up with him.

There are excellent supporting performances. Cate Blanchett is very good as Hepburn (though she doesn’t wipe out memories of Tovah Feldshuh in the same part in a 1977 miniseries, with Tommy Lee Jones as Hughes). In the best scene Scorsese lights them both as if they’re in a photographer’s dark room, though neither is: he’s on one side of a locked door, she’s on the other pleading with him to come out. He doesn’t come out.

The pretty Kate Beckinsale has the unhappy job of playing Ava Gardner, a woman so beautiful that no-one could play her; and Alan Alda gives an outstanding character performance as the creepy senator given the job of bringing Hughes low. He fails – Hughes rebuffs his transparent villainy a bit too easily – but then Hughes’ mental state brings Hughes low by itself, unassisted. No-one plays Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Olivia De Havilland, Rita Hayworth, or Shelley Winters, to name but five other ladies who could have been included.

I’m afraid the numerous aeronautical sequences pale beside those in *Hell’s Angels*, reliant as they are throughout on computer-generated imagery. You can nearly always tell CGI: and though they can do wonderful things with it, it’s no substitute for filmed reality, as the comparison between Hughes’ movie and Scorsese’s demonstrates. Having said that, the sequence where Hughes’s XF-11 crashes into some Beverly Hills houses is breath-taking.

A brilliant film, then – but the character I feel sorriest for is Howard Hughes Sr., who patented an oil-drill bit with 166 cutting edges, able to penetrate thick rock, which is still (2005) in use worldwide, which made his fortune, and his son’s fortune, and which enabled his son to go on the Kane-size spending spree and toy-collecting bonanza which the film depicts. I feel sorry for him because he did contribute in a lasting way, where his son failed to: but he isn’t in it.