

The following review will give you more information about the film. The highlighted parts help you spot the key elements straightaway.

### SMOKE (1994)

Directed by Wayne Wang. Written by Paul Auster, Photography, Adam Holender. Editing, Maysie Hoy. Production design, Kalina Ivanova. Costumes, Claudia Brown, Music, Rachel Portman. Cast: Harvey Keitel (Auggie Wren), William Hurt (Paul Benjamin), Harold Perrineau (Rashid Cole), Forest Whitaker (Cyrus Cole), Stockard Channing (Ruby McNutt), Ashley Judd (Felicity), Giancarlo Esposito, Jose Zuniga, Steven Gevedon (OTB men), Daniel Auster (book thief), et al. A Miramax release. 112 minutes.

The plot of this movie, like smoke itself, drifts and swirls ethereally. Characters and subplots are deftly woven into a tapestry of stories and pictures which only slowly emerges to our view. This film tries to convince us that reality doesn't matter so much as aesthetic satisfaction. In Auggie's New York smoke shop days pass by seemingly unchanging until he teaches us to notice the little details of life. Paul Benjamin, a disheartened and broken writer, has a brush with death that is pivotal and sets up an unlikely series of events that afford him a novel glimpse into the life on the street which he saw, but did not truly perceive, every day. Finally, it's Auggie's turn to spin a tale.

Smoke is a good example of what independent film should be. A simple story told with simple direction with an outstanding story. As much as the story is interesting, the cast is just as good. William Hurt and Harvey Keitel are excellent. Forrest Whitaker also gives a surprising role with a surprise ending that you will not see coming.

In 1990, novelist Paul Auster was asked to contribute a Christmas story to the New York Times. The resulting piece, "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story," forms the basis for his screenplay for SMOKE. Directed by Wayne Wang and set in a Brooklyn cigar store, Auster expanded the story to include four other characters whose lives intertwine with Auggie Wren's. As Auggie, the manager of the store that serves as a neighbourhood meeting place, Harvey Keitel gives a restrained, mellow performance. The other characters, Paul (William Hurt), a blocked writer; Rashid (Harold Perrineau Jr.), a troubled youth; Ruby (Stockard Channing), Auggie's former lover; and Cyrus (Forest Whitaker), Rashid's long-lost father, form a web of relationships over a few summer days. Auster, who had previously adapted his novel THE MUSIC OF CHANCE into a taut script, here exhibits a loose, almost improvisational style as he lets his characters simply talk about their lives. Wang eschews the big, somewhat melodramatic style he used in THE JOY LUCK CLUB for relaxed, natural direction that allows the actors, who are all terrific, to project an everyday realism seldom seen in American movies. The actual Christmas story appears at the end in a beautiful black-and-white montage, accompanied by a bittersweet Tom Waits song.

It's possible to adapt a good book into a good movie without losing the writerly nuances that make it a good book in the first place, but it's not easy; usually the author stomps off at some point in the process, thereafter to rant about how the work has been butchered, disembowelled, ruined by an insensitive director. Wayne Wang, in contrast, has a talent for creating with writers, not in spite of them. He worked closely with author Amy Tan in adapting her popular, well-written novel *The Joy Luck Club* into a popular, well-made movie. And he

worked so tightly with the highly literary writer Paul Auster on *Smoke* that the billing reads, "A Film by Wayne Wang and Paul Auster."

The duo are well suited: Wang's delight in found comedy (think of *Eat a Bowl of Tea*) meets Auster's fondness for found **fatalism** (think of *The Music of Chance*). In *Smoke*, Wang punches up the flavourful, hand-rolled quality of Auster's storytelling. Cigars and cigarettes are lit and sucked. **Events occur, linked like smoke rings and carrying about as much weight, as the stories waft, curl, and evaporate.**

**The title must be taken both literally and figuratively.** Literally as an anachronistic conceit: nearly everyone smokes in the film. Figuratively as, to quote Auster "A lot of talk in the movie is a smoke screen, the smoke that obscures vision, that obscures understanding. The film is about how people talk to each other and listen to each other - or don't."

The people who come in the cigar shop and those around it catalyze a series of interlocking events. These involve Auggie, who, among other endeavours, for many years has been setting every single day a camera at the same spot and the same hour outside the store, and photographing life as it goes by. When writer Paul flips through photos that all look about the same to him, Auggie admonishes him: **"You'll never get it if you don't slow down."** That's when Paul finds a picture of his wife who, later, while pregnant, was killed by a stray gang bullet. **Look and learn, learn the differences, learn what's behind the surface.**

Seldom has an actor's name been more apt than here. William Hurt, whose first book was a success, is hurt by the death of his wife and by the resulting new abstraction and inability to write. He might have been fatally hurt by a truck had a young black, Rashid, saved him. Rashid, complex, confused, and mysterious, eventually becomes the temporary guest of Paul. Rashid is but one of the young man's names. He is, like his host, a **myth-maker**. He invents facts about himself. A mix of truth and lies will later involve \$5,000 in Rashid's possession and, separately, a father who disappeared 12 years ago after his wife had died.

All this involves Auggie's semi-legal importing of Cuban cigars for connoisseurs; the odd fate of those cigars; a visit to Auggie by his old flame of 18 1/2 years ago, Ruby; some hoodlums; Ruby's perhaps true perhaps false tale about Auggie's grownup, crack-addicted daughter; a one-armed garage owner; and colourful peripheral types.

The inspiration for the film was "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story," which Paul Auster published in the *New York Times* of Christmas Day 1990. The film goes well beyond it, but is nonetheless incorporated as a fascinating yarn told by Auggie to Paul, about how he came to own his first camera. It is a warm story, like all others in this affectionate, intelligent movie that is both cinematic and literary. It celebrates, in many ways, **the power and beauty of the word along with friendship, bonding, and generosity.**

One of them, told to Rashid by Paul, is about a young man who finds, many years later, the frozen body of his father buried in Alpine ice. The father, at his death, was younger than the son is now. In the film this leads symbolically to a subtle yet clear connection with Rashid and his father. Another deals with a World War soldier, a writer who used up all the pages of his book to roll cigarettes in the trenches.

**Smoke** is an entirely original movie, yet not without connections to the yet unnamed genre of films with no traditional plot-line, but with coincidences or simultaneous events, with several characters who criss-cross, affect each other (or not), pick up the story, talk a lot.

**DO YOU AGREE WITH THIS?**

The photography is carefully spontaneous, with a camera that's always on the move, following its subjects as though we were scanning them. In contrast to the stillness and "mise en scene" approach of Auggie's black and white photos, the various rhythms of the colour camera and the editing use "montage" but neither pointedly nor exhaustingly.

**ON THE BASIS OF YOUR VIEWING OF THE FILM AND OF THE INFORMATION YOU GLEANED FROM THE POST ON THE BLOG AND THIS SHORT REVIEW, WRITE YOUR OWN COMMENTARY.**

**IF YOU LIKED IT OR NOT. WHY?**

**THE SCENE YOU LIKE BEST/LEAST WHY?**

**WHAT YOU FOUND REALLY INTERESTING ABOUT THE FILM (PHOTOGRAPHY, MONTAGE, ACTING, SETTING, THEMES DEVELOPED, ETC.)**

**WHAT THE MAIN THEME OF THE FILM IS.**

**YOUR REVIEW SHOULD BE AT LEAST 180 WORDS LONG.**