

Arts & Letters

FILM

[The Hoax]

The Howard Hughes He Never Knew

By Steve Sailer

IN THE 1970s, billionaire Howard Hughes's name was as omnipresent as Donald Trump's is today, even though the paranoid recluse was never seen. Since then, Hollywood has treated Hughes's legend well, with Martin Scorsese's masterful 2004 film "The Aviator" delivering an admiring look at the early life of the engineer and movie mogul. Jonathan Demme's "Melvin and Howard," which won a couple of Oscars in 1980, offered a gentle, oblique perspective on the national nuttiness that followed Hughes's death in 1976, such as the "discovery" of 40-odd purported wills.

Now "The Hoax" rounds out cinematic Hughes lore with a comic biopic of novelist Clifford Irving, the scamster who brought the world's Howard Hughes obsession to a crescendo in 1971-72 when he extracted huge advances from the greedy and credulous New York publishing and magazine industries for *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes*. Irving claimed it was based on taped interviews with Hughes. In truth, Irving had never had any contact with Hughes, who in "The Hoax" appears only in documentary footage.

"The Hoax" isn't in the same class as "The Aviator" and "Melvin and Howard,"

but it's significantly better than typical April releases. As Irving, Richard Gere, who normally competes with Bruce Willis for the title of Most Morose Star, revives much of the energy and charm that made him a delight in the under-rated 1983 American remake of Godard's "Restless." Now 57, Gere is still credible as the 40-year-old Irving. Indeed, in "The Hoax," Gere looks a lot like former leading man Alec Baldwin did at age 35, which might explain why Gere is still a name-above-title star, while Baldwin had merely a character role as a villain in "The Aviator."

Irving purloined a copy of an unpublished manuscript by Hughes's business manager, Noah Dietrich. This provided his project with some minimal verisimilitude, which Irving embroidered with sheer effrontery. It's always fun watching a good actor like Gere play a con man who must improvise ever more barefaced concoctions to parry each challenge to his credibility.

It's even more entertaining to see an excellent actor like Alfred Molina portray an inept liar. In "The Hoax," Molina plays Irving's Sancho Panza, researcher Dick Susskind, a man more at home digging up facts than retailing fabrications. In meetings with McGraw-Hill brass suspicious of the duo's honesty, he stares bug-eyed and sweats as he tries not to forget the simple bit of business Irving assigned him, only to blurt out at the most disturbing moment, "Howard Hughes gave me a prune!"

Director Lasse Hallström and screenwriter William Wheeler have included in their press notes an unusually frank list of what's fictional in "The Hoax." What they don't reveal, however, is more interesting: how they've reworked Irving, the perfect 1970s antihero, to make him more sympathetic to 21st-century audiences.

Today's moviegoers admire marital stability, so "The Hoax" forgets to mention that Irving's wife Edith, who eventually went to jail for trying to cash the publisher's advance check to "H.R. Hughes" under the name "Helga R. Hughes," was his fourth. Contemporary Americans especially dislike adultery by parents, so Irving's two small children with Edith were written out of the picture. In the film, Irving cheats on Edith once with the folk-singing Danish baroness and movie starlet Nina Van Pallandt and bitterly regrets his moral slip. The real Irving, however, was using his supposed meetings with Hughes abroad to cover frequent vacations with his mistress.

Exciting more controversy is the film's claim that Irving's fake autobiography helped inspire the Watergate break-in at the headquarters of Democratic National Committee Chairman Larry O'Brien, who, possibly not coincidentally, had been Hughes's chief lobbyist.

While overstated, this is not wholly implausible. Nixon had several shady links to Hughes, such as the tycoon's unsecured \$205,000 loan to his brother Donald's Nixonburger restaurant chain. Nixon believed the revelation of this dubious deal may have cost him the exceedingly close 1960 election. A decade later, according to his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, Nixon was irrationally obsessed with plumbing the relationship between Hughes and O'Brien.

The truth is that we still don't really understand Watergate, mostly because, in sharp contrast to the JFK assassination, the media haven't been all that interested in finding out precisely what happened. The good guys won and bad guys lost, they reason, so why bother with details that might muddy the glorious memory? ■

Rated R for language and nudity.

BOOKS

[*A Photographer's Life: 1990-2005*, Annie Leibovitz, Random House, 472 pages]

Portrait of the Artist

By Kelly Jane Torrance

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ is almost as famous as the celebrities she displays: her name inevitably conjures up countless iconic images created over a 37-year career. The photographer recently claimed the first and second spots when the American Society of Magazine Editors voted on the best magazine images of the last four decades. (First was the *Rolling Stone* cover of a naked John Lennon curled around a clothed Yoko Ono, taken the day the musician was murdered. Second was a pregnant—and naked—Demi Moore on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.) When a controversial cover is published, the sex appeal of a celebrity splashed over the page, the first thing that comes to everyone's mind is: looks like a Leibovitz.

Photographs—like Leibovitz's recent shots of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes's daughter Suri—help feed our appetites for details of the private lives of the stars. But unlike most of the celebrities whose lives she chronicles, Leibovitz's own life has remained hidden. That changed with the publication of her new book, *A Photographer's Life: 1990-2005*.

It's not so much Leibovitz who is revealed here, however, as it is those closest to her. There are few pictures of the photographer. But there are many revelatory photos of her family and, especially, of her lover.

The 15 years the book encapsulates correspond almost directly, Leibovitz writes in an introduction, with the time she spent with Susan Sontag. The critic and novelist, who died of cancer in 2004,

was the very definition of a public intellectual. But she kept her private life private. Sontag and Leibovitz never acknowledged their relationship to the press; the *New York Times* couldn't even get Sontag's son to confirm it for the obituary, though it was apparently common knowledge in New York intellectual circles. Now their life together—and some of its most intimate details—is splashed all over a highly publicized book. More controversially, so is Sontag's death. Leibovitz captures her lover ravaged by cancer in her final days and even as she lies dead. She photographed her father, who died just weeks after Sontag, in the same manner.

The images are as striking as they are shocking. "All photographs are memento mori," Susan Sontag wrote in her 1977 book *On Photography*. It's unlikely she imagined then that the difference between her lively intellectual self and her lifeless body would be captured between two covers.

A Photographer's Life is a rather odd sort of coffee-table book, combining in strange ways two of our ruling obsessions, celebrity and death. Vibrant pictures of A-list actors compete for our attention alongside scenes of genocide in Rwanda and the two-dimensional equivalent of death masks. Leibovitz's meandering introduction is not much help in sorting out the confusion. "I don't take a lot of purely personal pictures," she says, before writing that she considered making this a book of purely personal pictures. But she decided that a realistic chronicle of her life had to include both Susan Sontag and Scarlett Johansson. "I don't have two lives," she writes. "This is one life, and the personal pictures and the assignment work are all part of it."

One might almost think that her life is not so different from our own. The book is filled with the sort of pictures we all take, albeit of a rather better quality. There are family gatherings during Thanksgiving; beach vacations with nieces and nephews frolicking in the water; companions contemplating foreign grandeur; the death of loved ones and the birth of new ones.

But it doesn't take shots of Jack Nicholson to remind readers that Leibovitz's is no ordinary life. The photographer's work has provided her with more than just a household name; the book could be subtitled *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Few of us take holiday shots in Jordan, and even fewer stay there with the aid of Queen Noor and King Hussein. Many of the photos from Leibovitz's world travels feature tables in hotel rooms lavishly laid with top-quality room service. The effect is almost as opulent as a *Vogue* photograph of Nicole Kidman.

The personal is easily distinguished from the professional here. The personal is always black and white; the professional usually in glorious color. The personal is mostly candid; the professional often staged. But they're all Leibovitz. "I began calling myself a portrait photographer because it lent a kind of dignity to shooting well-known people," she says in the introduction, in what may strike many as a pretentious remark. But Leibovitz might actually be selling herself short. This photographer traffics in fantasy. Her photographs of celebrities don't just capture personalities, they create personae.

Her personal photographs do too. Leibovitz's large family—five brothers and sisters—seems to have served as an inspiration for the visual artist. Her mother comes across as a particular character, and Leibovitz has captured her in many moods, from pensive to exuberant. Marilyn Leibovitz was a dancer, and she seems unable to keep from moving. Walking on the beach with her grandson, she kicks her leg in the air with a comical grace. It's hard to resist the feeling that we know something of this woman after seeing her in these photos. That's a dangerous feeling, of course, but one a book like this practically forces upon the reader. I couldn't help wondering, for example, why Susan Sontag doesn't appear in a single photograph taken at Leibovitz family gatherings. Did the photographer compartmentalize her life? Or did Sontag and Leibovitz's insistence on privacy extend even to their loved ones?