

The tale of 1970s-era con man Clifford Irving 'The Hoax' is a delightful but confusing mix of lies and half-truths.

Sentinel Staff Report

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Films about con artists and scams comprise one of Hollywood's most popular genres. Think of Newman and Redford in "The Sting," Tony Curtis in "The Great Impostor," Leonardo DiCaprio in "Catch Me if You Can." They're usually light, airy comedies about lovable rogues who flaunt conventional behavior and show up society's shams, pretensions and, above all, greed.

Lasse Hallstrom ["My Life As A Dog," "What's Eating Gilbert Grape"] takes a darker view of the genre in "The Hoax." Based on one of the most notorious media incidents of the 1970s, the film tells the true story of Clifford Irving, a so-so novelist who with his friend Richard Suskind convinces the eminent publishing house of McGraw Hill that the world's most famous billionaire, the shadowy, reclusive Howard Hughes — remember Martin Scorsese's "The Aviator"? — has asked him to ghostwrite his autobiography. McGraw Hill, Life magazine and the Book of the Month Club buy into the project for enormous sums of money. But it's all a huge scam on Irving's part, a scam so incredible no one would believe it if it hadn't happened. The film follows the unfolding of the hoax step by step.

Well, almost step by step. Hallstrom purposely develops the plot with unclear references, fragmentary newsreel footage of the times, half-muttered bits of information and visual cuts to seemingly extraneous objects that soon have the viewer wondering what's true and what isn't, what's real and what's illusion.

In fact, that shadowy confluence of truth and lies is what the film is all about. Hallstrom is providing an entertainment with substance that forces the viewer to question not only the truth of the story but the reality of what he's seeing. When the film suggests connections between Irving's hoax and the Watergate break in and hints that Hughes used Irving's scam to bring about Nixon's downfall — none of which is in Irving's 1972 book on the hoax-- the film becomes a conspiracy theorist's joy, a psychologist's field day and a filmgoer's delight.

As Irving, Richard Gere adds to the uncertainty by portraying the writer not as the breezy, suave, lovable hustler he's played so many times in the past, but as a frustrated, feverish loser driven by dreams of revenge, money and power who gets so entangled in the thorny thicket of his own lies he no longer knows what's true and what isn't. First seen with unkempt hair and unstylish clothes, he soon begins to dress and look like Hughes, which adds yet another dimension to the film. Albert Molina plays Suskind, who in real life is purported to be a tough-minded character, but in the film is a comic Sancho to Irving's twisted Don Quixote. Ironically, if there's a problem with the film it is the very confusion of truth and reality. The film's central theme, since the fragmentary way the references are presented can lead to confusion, relies on the viewer knowing details about Hughes, Vietnam and Watergate — although even here the newsreel clips of Vietnam, peace demonstrations and presidential wrong-doing uncannily resemble today's political turmoil, adding yet another dimension to the film, and leaving the viewer much to ponder.

What does Irving, who has gone on to write a total of 17 books, several of them bestsellers, and is listed as one of the film's consultants, think of the film? He's reported to have said, "I had nothing to do with the movie, and it had very little to do with me." But at this point, who can believe anything he says?

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program, 'Cinema Scene,' on channels 27 and 72, every Thursday and Sunday at 8:30 p.m. Contact him at wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com.

{ verdict: B+ (R: Profanity). Starring Richard Gere, Alfred Molina, Hope Davis. Directed by Lasse Halstrom. 1 hour, 55 minutes. The Del Mar, 426-7500. }

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