A Metahistory of J. Edgar Hoover

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Abstract

J. Edgar Hoover is a nonpareil figure among modern American icons, seemingly both an agent and victim of history. As the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation for nearly fifty years (1924-1972), Hoover at once forged a public persona as the nation's foremost crime-fighter and assumed a backstage role as political rainmaker, holding court through eight presidencies. His posthumous celebrity, however, simultaneously dwarfs and compromises this legacy. Longstanding suspicions about Hoover's private life, widely disseminated and accepted in the mid-1990s as transvestism and homosexuality, have accrued the special resonance popular culture reserves for scandal-ridden caricature.

How can one begin to account for this sea change in the American public imagination? The posthumous speculations about Hoover suggest a curious and profoundly ambivalent response to a period of American life for which cultural narratives are only now being written—and for which Hoover seems to have earned a central place.

I will look to four narratives which prominently feature J. Edgar Hoover and remark on his influence on the political and cultural climate of his times. Examining literary biography, novel, and film genres will demonstrate representative and popular forms of historical narrative; moreover, their strikingly similar use of emplotment and characterization begs further questions. The thematic of Hoover envisioned by literary, biographic, and cinematic artists can be convincingly sketched as a Left or libertarian zeitgeist which warns against the frailty of justice, the corruptibility of the powerful, and the tyranny of the state. I intend to argue that each narrative treatment of Hoover establishes an essentially singular, composite text: a metanarrative explaining Hoover's role, particularly in post-war American history, as an archetypal tyrant-fascist and principal symbol for the vagaries of Cold War anxiety.

I will address the popular recrudescence of Hoover in light of several related arguments: that cultural memory articulates contemporary national identity; that the vicissitudes of the Cold War in the United States can be described as a movement from a culture of consensus to one of dissent; that present developments in the American ideological disposition follow a similar pattern; and that ideological assent only follows the consensus-creating power of a national jeremiad. The present revisioning of Hoover appears to be such a jeremiad, and hints at the workings of a broader national consciousness intent on re-examining and re-drawing its recent history.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .................................................. ii

CHAPTER I  Genealogy of a Media Event ................. 1

CHAPTER II  Hoover as American Icon .................. 7

CHAPTER III  Hoover in Recent Film and Fiction ....... 12

CHAPTER IV  The Hoover Metanarrative ................. 23

CHAPTER V  Cultural Politics, History, and Hoover ..... 32

Works Cited ............................................... 37
CHAPTER I Genealogy of a Media Event

When F. Scott Fitzgerald famously claimed there are no second acts in American lives he could hardly have been thinking about biography. Today, virtual droves of noteworthy American lives return, like well-worn haunts on the public imagination, to take up residence in biographical reinterpretations of their former lives and legacies. It's not as though the deceased biographical subject can't stay buried: it's just that some biographers take issue with the way they were interred to begin with, and feel a revised last rites is in order. Sometimes this means a resurrection of sorts, to a flourishing of renewed appreciation, and sometimes it's just opportunity for a second funeral—a different dirge, minus the decorous plaudits and the aggrieved. There's also a third, related possibility. Speaking recently of biography, John Updike observed, "Insofar as we are consumers of such books, or of reviews of them, we are collaborators in their creation." A timely and well received biography can usher in a virtual second act in its subject's life, inspiring a perceptible and lasting change in cultural opinion.

What one might call the afterlife, or second act, of J. Edgar Hoover is well under way. Moreover, it's a commonplace story, a morality tale. It's been almost a decade since Hoover—a famed, powerful public figure in American life for the balance of the twentieth century—was promptly exhumed and, as quickly, re-interred to great fanfare and controversy in Anthony Summers' 1993 biography Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover. Summers' account of the life and times of Hoover drew on the ever-popular narrative formula of the cautionary tale: the historical icon Hoover was tarnished in proportion to his alleged moral impropriety. The biography proposed itself as a historical revelation: the morally strait-laced Hoover, once a saint in the eyes of the American press and through his own meticulously managed public relations, is exposed as a charlatan,
according to the spectacle Summers presents of a hypocrite and deviant personality. Just as quickly as the biographer indulges this revelatory spectacle, he proceeds to speculation and analysis, a pat psychosexual reading of Hoover’s supposed perversion. The book jacket blurb promises “a chilling portrait of a legendary figure” and “a disturbing lesson” about abuses of power which “change the course of American history.” Essentially, the corpse is figuratively propped up, as if in drag itself, and subsequently disposed of once again, all with the biographer’s own auspicious zeal for the well crafted moral.

If Fitzgerald’s comment implies a personal lament about mortality (as it’s often claimed), the story of Hoover’s posthumous celebrity suggests second acts don’t necessarily augur the triumph of one’s living legacy. It can represent a travesty of it. Athan Theoharis persuasively argues that Summers’ “best-selling biography quickly and decisively shaped a new public view of Hoover” (11). In that regard, Hoover’s so-called second act bears the dubious distinction of threatening to ignominiously eclipse the first. The lasting implications this has for Hoover’s reputation and place in American history, significant as they may be, are far less compelling than the allegations’ sheer staying power. From the start, Summers’ allegations apparently had spectacular currency: “It was not the National Enquirer, the Star, “Hard Copy,” or “Geraldo” that led the way but the mainstream media—the

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1 Athan Theoharis best describes the substance of Official and Confidential’s most dramatic claims: “The media’s interest centered on Summer’s dramatic and salacious revelations that the former FBI director was homosexual, that he had been seen on at least two occasions dressed in drag at homosexual orgies, and that organized crime bosses, having acquired a compromising photograph of his homosexual activities, had blackmailed Hoover into leaving them alone” (11). He marvels at the details: “Nothing is missing: a homosexual Hoover in drag, engaging in sex with blond boys dressed in leather and … with a Bible being held, read from, and then discarded. No fundamentalist minister could better capture the immorality of homosexuals!” (42).

2 Summers engages in many of the analytical gestures typical to the biographical sub-genre disdainfully termed “pathography.” His book jacket measures out popular psychopathology: “With these and other astonishing disclosures, Summers defines a man and his times. He explores Hoover’s troubled youth as the son of a mentally ill father and a highly demanding mother, and the development of the obsessive behavior that dominated his later years.” Summers’ biography concludes with a chapter devoted to psychologizing Hoover, and what he hypothesizes as “J. Edgar Hoover syndrome” (437). For him, Hoover is a paranoiac, narcissist, and fascist who warrants literal comparison with the Nazis.
editors of Vanity Fair and USA Today, the producers of "Frontline" and the schedulers of the Public Broadcasting Corporation" (15-16). This legitimacy, which in the literary world translated into "must-read endorsements from authors Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal ..." for Summers (Maas 56), helped generate further hype, and further insinuated the truth behind Summers' claims.

The media found Summers' portrayal of Hoover "too titillating a story to ignore ..." (Theoharis 14). In historical retrospect, the ready acceptance of an "outed" Hoover is hardly a unique moment of the mass media absurd: cultural critics have heralded the 1990s, after all, as the decade in American culture when the media event came of age.3 "Still," Theoharis observes, "the quick acceptance of Summers's account of Hoover's homosexuality, and the media's failure to question his purported evidence, was distinctive" (16). This can be in part ascribed to Summers' exemplary storyline, the way it prompts readers to see the historical ramifications and moral compromise of Hoover's secret life "in such a captivating way" (13). Besides this scheme, which was well suited to the psychodrama Summers crafted, there was the visual tease. An irresistibly ironic national spectacle, the proposition itself of the Hoover caricature—the G-man in drag—ensured "its easy translation into a series of graphic jokes" (14). This was not just an easy laugh for comedians, as in the momentary Hoover-referencing sight gag from Naked Gun 33 1/3. The cartoon logic of Summers' Hoover spectacle dramatizes a collapsing of that most fundamental of character distinctions, the public and the private.

This influence of the private self upon the public figure is a hallmark of the dubious pop psychology upon which much of modern biography draws.

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3 The Hoover controversy, and the spectacle of the cross-dressing G-man popularized by Official and Confidential (and the widespread hype it received across mainstream American media), seems of a piece with other spectacular public events in that decade—the OJ Simpson trial and Monica Lewinsky affair being only bookends to innumerable others. These high profile and sometimes absurdly appealing events suggest to some academics "how the media produced our illusions and realities in the 1990s" (Garber xi).
It's not only unsurprising, then, that Summers' book is "typical of recent biographies that claim to reveal dark and sinister secrets but are nothing more than distortions of well-known facts" (DeLoach 28); it's equally predictable that "Summers isn't interested in understanding the real Hoover ..." (65), in terms of factual evidence. The Hoover of Summers' invention is merely one isolated example in which "social commentators have worried about contemporary biography turning into 'pathography'" (Weinberg 29). In the wake of poststructuralism's vogue, and the associated contention that "[b]iographies are, after all, not life—they are an arrangement and interpretation of a life" (Weinberg 28), artistic license has become the calling card of recent biography: "Now there's no shame in embracing the subjectivity of the form," one writer asserts (Mahler 104).

The special distinction with Summers' interpretation of Hoover is the way in which its popular appeal clearly outstripped the evidence that has since soundly refuted it. This posthumous portrayal of Hoover "quickly became unquestioned Truth" because of a curious prejudice, "a predisposition to suspect Hoover's homosexuality and to believe the worst ..." (Theoharis 14, 12). The peculiarly enigmatic historical Hoover has proven easy prey to such allegations: "For the Hoover biographer, these are important questions, and not the product of a perverted mind" (23). Indeed, variations on Anthony Summers' Hoover have since made prominent appearances in subsequent novels and film, works which themselves met with popular acclaim and critical regard for their treatments of American history. How does one explain the singular ease with which an eminent American, widely esteemed as a paragon of morality during his lifetime, has descended to tawdry caricature?

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4 The utility of pop Freudianism in so-called pathography, and its commercial appeal, lies in the way it legitimizes "the kind of lurid allegations that are sure to sell books" (DeLoach 65). Even the more respected practitioners of modern biography advise recourse to psychological interpretations. Leon Edel, the eminent biographer of (among others) Henry James—whose strict maxim was that a "writer of lives is allowed the imagination of form but not of fact" (13)—has likewise "encourage[d] telling lives through the lens of psychoanalysis ..." (Weinberg 26).
The story of J. Edgar Hoover’s second act is about more than just the reception of Summers’ biography: it’s the genealogy of a larger media event, spurned on by a spectacle and a morality-charged plotline which has proven captivating enough to pass muster in the popular imagination of American history. In other words, Hoover’s posthumous infamy reflects, at some level in American culture, a motivation for historical revisionism. “At what point does a biography become a national story,” one scholar of biography wonders, “symbolizing an aspect of the nation’s self-image, its longing and its fantasy?” (Sturken 33). Official and Confidential’s genius lies in the way it depicts a basically personal story that acquires national meaning. As Leon Edel has said, “No biography is complete unless it reveals the individual within history, within an ethos and a social complex” (14). Behind the figure of Hoover according to Summers, certainly one of the “images that [has] become part of [American] national mythology” (Rhie “Introduction” 4), there exists a historical interpretation.6

The improbable influence of Official and Confidential’s treatment of Hoover as a depraved fascist recognizes Hayden White’s observation that “the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological ...” (Metahistory xii). In the same fashion, Hoover as a cross-dressing hypocrite is made plausible by the degree to which that characterization agrees with basically political leanings. The Hoover caricature’s popularity underscores the operation of a cultural-historical consciousness: “the sense in which other cultures (and indeed our own) depend heavily on mythologised accounts of

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5 Theoharis, among others, has taken pains to refute Official and Confidential’s scandalous points: “Summers’s sources, if undeniably imaginative, provide no credible documentation for what amounts to no more than gossipy character assassination” (55).

6 One critic has usefully characterized the biography as the proponent of cultural memory, not history per se: “The remembrance of events and biographies of national importance move between the realms of cultural memory and history .... Cultural memory represents the stories that are told outside official historical discourse, where individual memories are shared, often with political intent, to act as counter-memories to history” (Sturken 31).
individual lives for the transmission of moral and cultural values" (Evans 3).

The proper domain for discussions of Hoover's legacy is cultural politics, where "[b]iography plays an important, even seductive part in these contemporary culture wars" (Rhiel 1). "Both conservatives and their opponents turn to the life-story to lay claim to a cultural inheritance which now seems up for grabs." Indeed, Hoover was an avatar of the American conservative establishment during his lifetime, and his posthumous vilification has occurred largely at the hands of the left-leaning opposition which vocally bemoan his abuses of power and reactionary authoritarianism. Once again, the veracity of who Hoover was is not really at issue; the issue is who Hoover has become, and why. Even if the cross-dressing G-man is a figment of Summers' mind, it seems to share affinities with the collective imagination which has subsequently embrace it across popular culture, and notably in James Ellroy's American Tabloid, Oliver Stone's Nixon, and Don DeLillo's Underworld. It's the myth, in other words, which compels attention: as White says, "[D]oes anyone seriously believe that myth and literary fiction do not refer to the real world, tell truths about it, and provide useful knowledge of it?" (Figural 22). The aura and figure of J. Edgar Hoover, I will argue, features prominently in the narratives of Summers, Ellroy, Stone, and DeLillo as an enigmatic and politically-freighted symbol for changing popular conceptions of postwar and cold war American history.
CHAPTER II Hoover as American Icon

J. Edgar Hoover is a nonpareil figure among modern American historical personalities. As the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation for nearly fifty years (1924-1972), Hoover at once forged a public persona as the nation’s foremost crime-fighter and simultaneously assumed a backstage role as political rainmaker, holding court through eight presidencies. Certainly, Hoover was the single most powerful, and one of the most influential non-elected public officials in the annals of the republic. If the Kennedys were the closest thing to American royalty, as people often quip, Hoover was the nearest approximation of a lifelong autocrat. As one writer puts it simply, "J. Edgar Hoover perhaps wielded more power than any one person in American history" (Ross 215).

He was doubtless an ideologue, a distinctive one even amid the ideologically-dense rhetoric of anti-communist and cold war times. Hoover's politics, and the image of his morally strait-laced G-man, were his signature contributions to American life. The FBI vigorously touted its officers' moral rectitude, and advertised their consummate American-ness: in one of his many popular (and ghost-written) books, Hoover assured his fellow Americans that he and his foot soldiers were "never very far from the crossroads of America, either spiritually or physically" (qtd. in Potter 3). Elsewhere, he limned his anti-constitutional sentiments by suggesting that American government works best as "the dictatorship of the collective conscience of our people" (qtd. in Powers 213). There is little doubt that, as even an ex-FBI executive who served as a stalwart Hoover confidant admits, he "was head of an agency that was the epitome of American authoritarianism" (DeLoach 91).

Hoover became a Washington institution, and this further contributed to "a status in American life that is almost unique" (qtd. in Gentry 399), as a Commonweal writer expressed it. At his funeral, President Richard Nixon
said, "For nearly half a century, nearly one fourth of the whole history of this Republic, J. Edgar Hoover has exerted a great influence for good in our national life" (qtd. in Powers 721). At least one journalist recalled Hoover as a fixture on the scene, perennially presiding over all the solemn, high events of state. Hoover was also a bona fide celebrity, a national hero, by virtue of his FBI's extensive public service campaigns, community appearances to religious and children's organizations, and the director's own preference for high visibility: "however much Hoover deserved his reputation as head G-man, that image was largely crafted through the director's keen eye for good publicity" (DeLoach 61).

Long before Official and Confidential, the FBI director was susceptible to being a victim of his own self-perpetuated image. The iconic aspect of Hoover encouraged some to speculate, oftentimes wildly, about the outsized image and what it may hide. The most popular example of this kind of Hoover folklore involves his infamous files, which have "attain the status of legend" right alongside the G-man himself (Jeffreys 69). Although many of the existing files were destroyed by his secretary immediately following his death, this has rarely prevented many from wondering about the millions of dossiers and filing cards documenting the activities of celebrities, activists, politicians, and everyday citizens. The imagination of the files and their contents provides some of the most fertile ground for the popular conspiratorial tendencies in the United States, and such thinking has solidified the image of Hoover as perhaps the most infamous information maven of the twentieth century. "Nobody in modern American history has been more reviled, feared, and, in some quarters, revered as John Edgar Hoover ...," writes one observer (Maas 56).

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7 Hugh Sidney of Life remembers Hoover as a figurehead: "I've lost count of the times I've ridden or walked the famous mile from Capitol to White House in inaugural parades or funeral corteges or moments of national triumph. Almost every time when we passed the FBI building I looked up and there was J. Edgar Hoover on his balcony, high and distant and quiet, watching with his misty kingdom behind him, going on from President to President and decade to decade ..." (qtd. in Gentry 58).
Criticism of Hoover sometimes sought to draw connections between the director and the FBI itself—that the monolithic law enforcement agency was a symptom of Hoover's own barely concealed totalitarian bent. Prior to Summers' "outed" Hoover, this seems to have been the most sophisticated vilification of Hoover. Norman Mailer typified this approach by deducing that "because [the FBI] is faceless it is insidious, plague-like, an evil force ..." (6-7). Theodore Roethke characterizes Hoover as "the head of our thought police ... a preposterous figure ..." (qtd. in Summers 13). Even a disinterested historian of the FBI since Hoover's reign admits that Hoover-era FBI practices rightly earned a decidedly undemocratic reputation: "If you did a lot of historical research, it would be difficult to distinguish the workings of the KGB and the FBI, politically, organizationally, and philosophically, over those years" (Jeffreys 64). During his lifetime, even in criticism Hoover's established place was acknowledged, as when activist Tom Hayden claimed in hyperbole that "Hoover is the evidence of some profound flaw in American democracy" (qtd. in Jeffreys 66).

Although Hoover was at times a target of criticism, including sometimes as a suspected homosexual, no allegations courted the curious appeal that Summers' have. Previous biographers and historians touched upon suspicions of Hoover's sexuality, but ventured little in contrast to Summers: "There is no compelling evidence for a definite judgment in either direction" (Powers 173), one writer claimed only scant years before Official and Confidential's publication. Since then, Official and Confidential seems to have tapped into a widespread, latent presumption, at least among interested Americans, that Hoover's public persona was a conscious front to a less seemly private reality. Dismayed by the apparent unreliability of Summers' accusations, that "Hoover the cross-dresser is just too deliciously ironic to be true,"

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8 It's widely documented that Hoover zealously chased any rumours of his homosexuality which surfaced, and commanded his FBI field agents to do the same. Hoover, who never married or carried on heterosexual affairs in public, was most commonly accused of maintaining a homosexual relationship with Clyde Tolson, a longtime friend and FBI deputy.
one writer refused to let the thought go: "But we can dream, can’t we? For connoisseurs of hypocrisy, it is hard to beat the spectacle of our No. 1 G-man ... getting all dolled up ..." (Rich). Another chimes in similarly: "I thought, Oh, wow, at last the final solution! Alas, it turns out to be all garbage without even a presentable trash can to contain it" (Maas 56). The idea of seeing Hoover exposed, even in death, appears to be irresistible: "Come on, you say, so what? Isn’t there a little poetic justice here? Hoover on the receiving end of what he’d been dishing out. Hey, right on!" (56).

By the time of Summers’ biography, the desire to demystify Hoover, or to even just see his reputation somewhat sullied, suggests the extent to which Hoover had become a character in the symbolic pantheon of American historical figures. Summers’ previous biographies of Marilyn Monroe and other American icons, rife with unconventional interpretations and conspiratorial musings, all but ensured Hoover would achieve in Official and Confidential a certain cult celebrity. Even Theoharis, whose several studies of Hoover read like a picture of objective scholarship, concedes that it “might be satisfying to conclude that Hoover richly deserves Anthony Summers as his biographer” (55). “It was never that simple,” Theoharis chides those who indulge Summers’ elaborate and captivating psychopathology of Hoover—but that doesn’t make it any less compelling (164).

In a personal essay exploring his own use of history, Don DeLillo explores how writers justify indulging in creative license with historical personalities. After speaking explicitly about Hoover, who looms large in his novel Underworld, DeLillo writes: "It is also true that power and renown tend themselves to diminish the distance between fact and fiction. A person sufficiently original and lustrous inspires his own transcendence, his space-launch out of strictly historical levels and his reimagining in fiction, myth, fairy tale and cartoon" ("Power" 62). In his own lifetime, Hoover achieved an iconic stature; since then he has steadily become a stock
character, a cultural referent. Even in years preceding Summers' biography, one theatre director said as much: "He's sick, cruel, dogmatic, stupid, racist ... Everything I love in a character" (qtd. in Monsell 113). What that character has presently come to represent is limned in the depictions of Hoover which have conspicuously surfaced, time after time, in the years immediately following *Official and Confidential*. 
CHAPTER III Hoover in Recent Film and Fiction

In the seven years that have followed Official and Confidential's release, a good number of the comedy routines and Hoover in-jokes have subsided, and its author is no longer actively selling his book with media appearances spreading the new Hoover "gospel." These factors would contribute to a diminished sense of the book's lasting significance—were it not for a number of important exceptions. Summers' biography has been the germ, also, for at least three subsequent historical texts—two bestselling novels and a Hollywood film—that make dramatic use of a distinctly Summers-esque Hoover. These fictions of modern American history all strive to tell unofficial narratives, counter-myths, and psychodramas that shed new light on history as it's been traditionally conceived. "Fiction is a kind of speculative history ...," EL Doctorow once noted, and American Tabloid, Nixon, and Underworld seem to abide by that faith in the importance of historical revisionism (qtd. in Hutcheon "Poetics" 112). More to the point, these historical tales mark the point at which Summers' unbridled speculation becomes sanctioned as generally accepted fact: the Hoover of historical fact loses favour to the Hoover of dramatic caricature.

Bestselling author James Ellroy, best known for his crime fiction and apocryphal accounts of Hollywood history, began to take interest in Hoover with his 1995 novel American Tabloid. Influenced by Libra, an earlier DeLillo novel which poses itself as a counter-myth to the JFK assassination, Ellroy brings a similar historical sensibility—the notion that prominent events can be explained by a series of vague interconnections, conspiracies, and secret histories.9 "Basically it's a secret history," Ellroy claims (Duncan); elsewhere he calls his book "a tabloid sewer crawl" (Gray).

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9 Ellroy explains to an interviewer his debt to DeLillo: "The genesis of all this is reading Don DeLillo's Libra, a brilliantly fictional take on Lee Harvey Oswald and the Kennedy assassination" (Duncan).
The writer's evident debt to DeLillo—that certain "something about Libra [that] unsettled Ellroy"—is made apparent in American Tabloid's epigraph. He explains his disdain for hagiography which "sanctifies," and for the myths popularized by "[m]ass-market nostalgia": this type of history mistakes prominent figures' "expedient gestures as moments of great moral weight" (3). Ellroy calls for "a reckless verisimilitude" which can "demythologize an era and build a new myth from the gutter to the stars." His novel clearly recognizes this, and seeks to approach a swath of mid-century American history as a narrative of the relations between various seats of power, official and illicit.

In a novel webbed with real and fictional personalities, and the speculative revisioned history their actions shape, it should be little surprise that Hoover occupies a figuratively central place. Neither a minor nor major character, Hoover is clearly a functional character for Ellroy, who sees in him a figure of power, corruption, and prurient tastes. He's the "subterfuge king" who has Capitol Hill "hot-wired" (45, 29).

Beyond that, however, Hoover stands in as a shadow narrator of sorts. He alone recognizes how ideology and cold war rhetoric bring politicians and crimelords together, that "Anti-Communism breeds strange bedfellows" (359). It's clear that he knows more about the events and figures involved in American Tabloid than anyone else—at the very nexus of political and sexual intrigue, he's a consummate information maven. A disturbed character frets over Hoover's reach and knowledge: "Mr. Hoover knew him—as no one else ever had or ever would. He felt an ugly wave of love for the man" (544).

In the novel Hoover maintains a close relationship with the prominent American magnate Howard Hughes, who supplies Hoover with Hollywood gossip from the scandal sheet he owns. Hughes' editorial direction includes a number of propagandistic and racist interests, as well as leveraging his and his personal friends' own influence and reputation. Hoover's interest in Hughes' rumour and innuendo is described as craven; at one point, Hoover
speaks of it as "'my bedtime reading'" (136). At least one historian has taken pause to draw the same, surprisingly self-assured inference: "In many ways, his political sex files seem to indicate that Hoover lived vicariously through the sex lives of others" (Ross 216). In Ellroy's narrative, this prurience, gilded with sexual connotation, is reinforced time and again.

Hoover's position of informed and blackmail-armed privilege is conflated with strongly sexualized characterization. One character says "'he's a voyeur'" (439). Ellroy's brash John Kennedy, who rails frequently against that "'closet fairy J. Edgar Hoover'" (460), tells a woman that "'Hoover's touchy because he's a Nazi faggot who hates all men with normal appetites'" (474). Another fears Hoover's taste for revenging himself on those whom he feels disrespectful: "J. Edgar Hoover fucked you—you fucked him and he fucked you back much more efficaciously" (354). And so he is "a vindictive old queen" (150).

The novel's Hoover ascends to the quality of an archetype—an exemplary mastermind, villain, and deviant. One narrative voice even characterizes a series of events and intrigue in his name: "It was complex and vindictive and psychologically dense Hoover thinking" (544). Hoover is the most primeval villain figure in American Tabloid, and so when one character speaks to an assembled group of his particular fear of him, another agrees, and then the entire group laughs in nervous acknowledgement. In Ellroy's "demythologized" assessment, Hoover the fascist homosexual paranoiac is no stretch of his authorial license: "Mal called Mr. Hoover 'a limp-wristed Fascist in jackboots and lavender lederhosen.' An inflammatory statement?—hardly" (286).

Director Oliver Stone's films, particularly his historical movies, have a notorious flair for the inflammatory. Appearing in 1995, his Nixon, which rendered a Greek tragedy of the Richard Nixon presidency and events surrounding it, incurred much of the same critical and popular wrath that has dogged his work in the 1990s. Attention is directed particularly at his
historical films, which are all premised variously on a left-wing conception of Kennedy as the quintessential American prince and patriarch—a figurative Hamlet whose early death came at the hands of conspiring military-industrial interests. Nixon, which has been called "a $43 million term paper" (qtd. in Monsell 209), is an extension of Stone’s general historical thesis: American government is not only corrupt, but actively directed by shadowy rainmakers—military hawks, indolent ideologues, captains of industry, and other caricatures of right-wing villainy—who determine the course of historical events.

Given all this, it is a little surprising that, prior to Nixon, Hoover had not received character treatment at Stone’s hands: it is difficult to imagine a more emblematic monolith for tyranny and conspiracy in Stone’s political fables. Needless to say, Nixon’s Hoover (Bob Hoskins) fulfills the promise of villainous exemplar. Stone is explicitly indebted to Summers’ allegations, which dot the screenplay’s footnotes in justification of his dramatization of Hoover. However, his characterization reverts to a flawed and fatuous portrayal of the homosexual as effete deviant, a homophobic stereotype recycled from JFK’s Guy Bannister (Tommy Lee Jones).

As one commentator remarked, Hoover and Tolson come off as “gay pranksters” (Raines). They are shown relaxing poolside, as Hoover takes pictures of him—recreating the scene presented in several real documents, photographs of Hoover taken by Tolson and vice-versa in a similar tropical locale.10 Tolson tells him at one point to “give me a break, Mary” (Hamburg 171); in Nixon a virulent anti-Robert Kennedy remark, sometimes attributed to Tolson by Hoover biographers, is also dramatized when he scoffs that someone should “shoot the little bastard” (177).

Hoover himself is described in the screenplay as an oily, even reptilian figure. In one humorously suggestive description, Hoover, who is

10 “Whether the Hoover-Tolson relationship did include a sexual union is simply not known. An indication of the intimacy of the relationship is the collection of hundreds of candid photographs Hoover took of Tolson ...” (Powers 172).
coated "with steam-room sweat, looks like a Roman emperor" (168). "Like a lizard" (171), the debauched Hoover leers at a young serving boy, whom he compels to eat an orange wedge from his mouth. In an interesting scene cut from the theatrical release, Hoover helps Nixon with his attire during his daughter's wedding, putting on Nixon's necktie. The two exchange a complex glance at close quarters and pause before falling apart from one another. The scene, however, crosses any line of subtlety when Hoover affirms his assistance for Nixon by suggestively quipping, "I always get my man" (225).

The thematic end to all this digressive attention to Hoover's alleged homosexuality and, moreover, his "deviant" behaviour is basic enough: Hoover’s apparent deviance is dramatized as shorthand explanation for his essential evilness. Although the details are never made clear, Hoover's fear that Attorney General Robert Kennedy's law enforcement prestige was eclipsing his own, and even possibly threatening to reveal his own mob ties (a Summers touchstone), makes him decide to become political kingmaker. He selects Nixon as a pliable selection, a paranoiac who depends on Hoover's inside knowledge of people and affairs. At his nadir, Nixon (Anthony Hopkins), realizing that he has been used, curses Hoover during a drunken moment alone: "The old queen did it on purpose" (178).

What Hoover does, according to Nixon, is to enmesh the president in a series of power relations which effectively render him the pawn of others—a subject to the system Stone has Nixon, in a trite touch, call "the beast." Bestial imagery and sound follow up this theme in the screenplay directions, as when Hoover and Tolson first cajole Nixon to run for election against John Kennedy at a paddock. The screenplay reads: "Nixon feels uncomfortable. Images, vague, disturbing. Even the nostrils on the horse seem to be emitting a devil's fire, and the noises of the snorting animal magnify ..." (178). At any rate, Stone's contention is that the industrial-military complex does exist and exert its presence over Nixon, and that Hoover acts in concert with it.
Hoover himself, however, is finally aloof to both Nixon, the so-called beast of the system, and other political rivals like the Kennedy brothers. He seems ultimately motivated by self-interest and ideologically-spiked paranoia. Hoover advises Nixon: "The Communists have never been closer. Now is the time to go back to the old themes" (223). Hoover's corrupt qualities, whatever else they may be, are treated as primeval and fossilized.

Critics were unimpressed by Stone's revisionism. One accused him of "sophomoric Marxism circa 1950" for his conspiratorial musings (Ambrose 1533). He drew fire especially for Nixon's didactic quality, which seeks to make obvious "contributions to public thinking by fashioning forceful interpretations of the past" (Toplin, History viii). Henry Kissinger, who was himself dramatized unflatteringly in Nixon, succinctly articulated the issue: "Truth, as John Stuart Mill argued, in the end prevails in the competitive marketplace of ideas. But what if public discourse becomes warped by powerful engines of myth, big budgets and outright falsehoods?" (qtd. in Monsell 211). Ironically, Stone has invoked precisely this rhetoric to defend his filmmaking.  

J. Edgar Hoover plays an integral and controversial role in Nixon's historical narrative. If, as Maureen Dowd editorializes, the real star in Oliver Stone's histories "is Mr. Stone's psyche," then it makes sense that archetypes of good and evil will likely predominate. The post-Summers Hoover is a ripe target for the kind of two dimensional typecasting Stone requires, such that evil is made obvious by its repugnant, debased attributes. If Summers' Hoover meets widespread acceptance, why not Stone's? Dowd describes the situation best: "Perhaps every society gets the mythmaker it deserves as well. A culture that confuses celebrity with value, historical knowledge

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11 Stone spoke to an audience in 1992 at the National Press Club: "Thomas Jefferson urged on us the notion that when truth can compete in a free marketplace of ideas, it will prevail. There is as yet no marketplace of history for the years of the Kennedy assassination and immediately afterward. Let us begin to create one" (qtd. in Kagan 206).
with repressed memory, gets Mr. Stone." Just as Summers is apparently content to fit his depiction of Hoover to the generic mould of cautionary tale—and, as a result, to shoehorn in whatever allegations reinforce said theme—Stone seems at his most comfortable in casting such an outsized cliché of villainy as foil to the tragic Nixon or the heroic Kennedy.

Don DeLillo shares with Stone a deep interest in the vicissitudes of American experience. From his first novel's self-described attempt to "find pattern and motive, to make of something wild a squeamish thesis on the essence of the nation's soul" (Americana 349), DeLillo has proven himself to be among the most under-heralded of living American cultural critics. DeLillo's recent work has increasingly emphasized American history, and Underworld itself aspires to provide an unofficial cultural history of the final half of what Henry Luce once enthusiastically called the American century. Still, DeLillo has always been a practitioner of the novel of ideas, and has very few American peers in this regard: he is among those, according to one critic, "whose work is a kind of anatomy, an effort to represent their culture in its totality ..." (Lentricchia 240). Underworld is to date the apotheosis of DeLillo's literary mandate—a project that "[r]eflects something that flows through the deep mind of the culture ..." ("Power" 62)—and even prompted the reclusive writer to publish a personal commentary in the New York Times exploring the appeal history exercises on his work.

Paranoia, a defining element of postwar American history, is one of DeLillo's most well-known thematic touchstones. (Martin Amis has named him "the poet of paranoia" [12]). "Elevated to a principle of national policy in the McCarthy years of the Cold War," writes Peter Knight, "and then reappropriated as an indispensable attitude of the counterculture in the

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12 An Underworld critic claims DeLillo's "subject is, manifestly, Cold War America" (Tanner 71). According to one DeLillo scholar, "DeLillo in his more recent work from Libra to Underworld has turned to what Linda Hutcheon has identified as 'historiographic metafiction,' a poetics that defines postmodern fictional practice" (Duvall 562).
1960s, paranoia has become one of the defining characteristics of postwar American politics and culture" (811). As a "secret history of paranoia" (812), Underworld is the novelist’s most comprehensive examination of the cultural resonance of the American paranoid imagination. DeLillo’s Underworld “revises the anatomy of popular American paranoia that DeLillo has conducted in his previous novels ...” For him paranoia marks the collective reaction to historical events in this era; it’s the defining attribute of such an age’s cultural memory. By its conclusion, Underworld revises Thomas Pynchon’s memorable axiom from Gravity’s Rainbow, “Everything is connected” (820), with “Everything is connected in the end” (826).

J. Edgar Hoover exists in the novel as both a recurring character and as a personification of this sensibility. This should not surprise: as Frank Lentricchia has argued, “DeLillo ... offers us ... no ‘individuals’ who are not expressions of—and responses to—specific historical processes” (241). He is the novel’s standard bearer for this kind of Pynchon-esque paranoid plotting. His “presence introduces an element of paranoia ...,” according to one scholar (Parrish 705); according to the author himself, Hoover’s early appearance “set[s] an early tone for the shifting conflicts I hoped to examine” (“Power” 62). Timothy Parrish suggests that “Hoover marks the culmination of a series of characters” in DeLillo’s novels and “is included in [Underworld] almost as an homage” (706). No other character, Parrish opines, “is capable of making the sorts of cultural and historical connections that DeLillo demands of his readers ...” (706). In other words, Hoover looks to be the author’s figurative guide to the thematic concerns of the novel as a whole.

DeLillo’s novels demonstrate a sophisticated interaction with history. A character in Underworld, for example, seeks the implicit meanings that he suspects always lay behind historical events: “Dietrologia. It means the science of what is behind something. A suspicious event. The science of what is behind an event” (280). “DeLillo ... wants to use the novel’s ability to be both within history and outside of it in order to provide a framework for understanding the past fifty years of American history” (Parrish 700).
Hoover is a cipher of his times and of his country. Hoover is simultaneously a mastermind and paranoiac, literally beset by his own superb grasp of the cultural and psychic climate of his surroundings: "'Find the links. It's all linked. The war protestors, the garbage thieves, the rock bands, the promiscuity, the drugs, the hair'" (577), he tells Tolson at one point, confessing his fears of the counterculture. For it is Hoover who perceives—or thinks he perceives—"an undervoice" of dissent in the nation (563). Hoover's paranoia is equated with the state's: it's a conception of "American paranoia as a psychic strategy for maintaining a stable sense of identity, whether on the individual or the national level" (Knight 817). American paranoia in this historical context is fed, of course, by the cold war itself—such that "a form of national consensus is not so much a result of a natural unity as a product of there being a definite and coherent enemy ..." Inseparable from the state and its ideology, Hoover's character has a distinct inhumanity, particularly given his parodically ludicrous fears of a hippie revolution.

Although he never becomes as unequivocal as Summers, DeLillo does indulge in caricature with Hoover, explaining his extravagant paranoia as part and parcel of equally magnificent sadistic, sociopathic, morbid, self-repressive, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies. His Hoover suffers from "some bitter condition he has never been able to name" that is presumably meant to explain his exterior—"his harsh judgment and traditional background and early American righteousness and ... quibbling fear and dark shame and ... dread of physical contact and in a thousand other torments too deep to name" (28, 573). DeLillo engages in playful scenes rife with allusions to Summers: becoming sadistically infatuated with a dark Pieter Brueghel painting; secretly watching Tolson undress (who is not unaware of the fact); attending

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14 "Edgar, by the window, heard the old alarums. He thought the time might be coming, once again, when ideas became insurgent and rebel bands were reborn, longhair men and women, scruffy and free-fucking, who moved toward armed and organized resistance, trying to break the state and bring about the end of the existing order" (DeLillo 563-64).
a costume ball in a leather biker mask (at the same hotel where Summers alleges Hoover-in-drag sightings); and even introducing a nun by the same name as another of the novel’s characters. In addition, DeLillo revisits several unusual facts of record, including his notorious germ phobias and his thousand-pound, lead-lined coffin—"To protect his body from worms, germs, moles, voles and vandals" (577-78). In his most oblique yet explicit impression of his opinion for the historical Hoover, DeLillo writes, "Every official secret in the Bureau had its bloodbirth in Edgar’s own soul" (573).

Knight finds it "a clumsy psychologizing of history ... the emanation of a personal pathology writ large" that Underworld’s Hoover is ultimately revealed in all his post-Summers glory to be "the Law’s debased saint" (Knight 818, DeLillo 826). "The reader is left to suppose that the emergence of paranoia in the collective imagination is in part a result of Hoover’s projecting his own internal weaknesses and thwarted desires onto the external scene of American society" (Knight 818). Knight further complains about DeLillo’s characterization of Hoover as a repressed homosexual, which is perhaps more slyly ambivalent than Knight credits him, calling it "a return to pop-Freudian theories of paranoia as a result of repressed homosexuality."

In an interesting postscript, however, Knight reveals his own indecision on the factual Hoover: "This explanation of the source of popular paranoia as a manifestation of ... psychosexual disturbance ... is unconvincing, though the portrait of Hoover is not so inaccurate."

All three of these historical narratives clearly pose more questions than they answer, and all three just as clearly share similar thematic intentions. At the root of Knight’s criticism seems to be a suspicion of the greater ideological or historical statements that a work like Underworld presents its audience. Any characterization of Hoover bearing likeness to Summers’, like Ellroy’s, Stone’s, and DeLillo’s, entails some broad political assumptions. These narratives, in other words, advance a remarkably comparable portrayal of Hoover as a cultural and psychological creation.
Seen from the perspective of Summers' biography and these subsequent characterizations, the Hoover composite assumes the dimension of a dramatic archetype. Passing into plausibility through these texts' reification of *Official and Confidential*’s caricature, this politically-charged representation of Hoover redefines notions of his role in history.
CHAPTER IV The Hoover Metanarrative

Citing the work of DeLillo and Stone (he could have easily added Ellroy), Hayden White detects a similar thematic penchant. "All deal with historical phenomena," he notices, "and all of them appear to fictionalize, to a greater or lesser degree, the historical events and characters that serve as their referents in history" (Figural 67). Perhaps the most immediate question this begs is why. DeLillo concedes White's observation, noting that the writer "has his themes and biases and limitations" ("Power" 63): the literary artist is interested in "break[ing] the faith of conventional re-creation." DeLillo calls this "counterhistory" (62), and implies its necessity for critically examining the culturally sanctified in history--for interrogating the "clarity and intactness that amount[s] to a moral burnish" in recognized histories.

Linda Hutcheon has named this same fictional practice "historiographic metafiction" (Politics 50). According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is a recognition that "we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narratives" and, hence, understandings of history (58). Furthermore, it reminds that "while events did occur in the real historical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning" (Poetics 97). Official and Confidential is a clear if extreme example of how characterization shapes the themes one can expect: in a rough kind of determinism, the Summers logic is that Hoover's political tyranny accords with an essentially flawed, aberrant personality. Although it professes to be an accurate biography, its elaborate indulgence in psychological drama recalls the wholly fictional creations of Ellroy and company: "Fiction slips into the skin of historical figures," DeLillo asserts ("Power" 63).
DeLillo emphasizes the speculative nature of his Hoover, seeing it as "a disinvention, real, conjectured, gambled on, guessed at" (62). In agreement with historiographic metafiction, DeLillo admits to the historical Hoover's "impregnability" but sees it as incentive, "an incitement to the novelist's perennial effort to detect the hidden nature of things." What DeLillo ultimately emerges with—and what Summers, Stone, and Ellroy emerge with—is arguably a projection, a culturally-based set of assumptions which, according to his own artistic imagination, seem to resemble and understand what's known of the historically reported Hoover personality. Although he recognizes that he can never truly "see inside the human works, down to dreams and routine rambling thoughts," the writer takes his recourse in literary convention.

The results of this literary undertaking are telling: the similarities between the Stone, DeLillo, Ellroy, and Summers Hoovers suggest a measure of assent on the question of his character, and the archetypal generalizations of him within the various narratives are even more suggestive, a tip-off to contemporary conceptions of Hoover. From this vantage, a reader can also see how the emplotment of the various Hoover characters further affects possibilities of theme and historical perspective. Finally, the moral and political dimensions to these narratives will become apparent. The Hoover metanarrative—the fundamental story which runs across the biographical, cinematic, and novelistic texts in discussion—presents reasonable evidence of a broader historical revisionism at work.

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15 "When history offers up shiny gifts, the novelist begins to see the rightness of his enterprise. But how right is it actually? Doesn't a fiction writer necessarily distort the lives of real people? Possibly not as much as the memoirist does, intentionally, or the biographer, unintentionally.

That's the easy answer. The deeper reply begins with a man who distorted the lives of real people as a matter of bureaucratic routine.

J. Edgar Hoover makes several appearances in 'Underworld.' He is not one of the central characters. These people are all inventions, whole or partial, issuing from the author's memory and imagination, from the small gathered fragments of overheard voices and random faces glimpsed in the street.

Hoover is a disinvention, real, conjectured, gambled on, guessed at. Hoover in his taut and raging selfhood. Hoover in his impregnability, an incitement to the novelist's perennial effort to detect the hidden nature of things" ("Power" 62).
The treatment of Hoover corresponds closely with certain tenets and traditions of historical drama. He is the powerful kingmaker in *Nixon* who elects to choose Richard Nixon as the next president, and the equally astute information-trading insider of *American Tabloid*. "Strong personalities create events in these dramas," one critic cites, not outside political or economic factors (Toplin, "Filmmaker" 1220-21). The action of the various Hoover narratives, except for *Underworld*, typically emanates from Hoover himself: he's central to the storyline even in his absence, as in *Nixon*, where the president only later comes to recognize (and curse) Hoover's machinations. In terms of plot structure, conspiracy is foremost: in Summers' hypothesis about mob blackmail; *Underworld*'s rampant paranoia; Stone's notion of the American military-industrial establishment; and *American Tabloid*'s limning of the Kennedy assassination. According to Herbert Lindenberger, who has written a study of historical drama's conventions, this shared element should not be surprising, given that "conspiracies provide the central fable shaping the vast majority of historical dramas" (30). Hoover is also consistently a dark, menacing figure. DeLillo posits that "power and renown tend themselves to diminish the distance between fact and fiction" ("Power" 62); in this sense, Hoover's extremely powerful position may result in more extreme and cartoon-like representations of a man who, historically speaking, is equally shrouded in mystery. Histories tend to accord with this logic: "The thinking and writing we do about history are in one sense a contemplation of the magic which we feel inheres in persons who hold power and the situations in which they wield it" (Lindenberger 154). Further, as Summers' outlandish orgy accounts and Ellroy's salacious, self-described "sewer crawl" through American history acknowledges, in the dramatization of Hoover's power there is a degree of vicarious thrill being entertained: "Observing power at its royal source means in a sense to participate in it: we become privy to secrets that would otherwise be withheld from us ..." (154). Identifying a
source of power also presages a certain kind of characterization: generally benevolent or tyrannical.

Hoover is an obvious tyrant, in keeping with historical drama. He frustrates the pursuit of justice: in *Official and Confidential* he needs to cover-up his secret life; in *American Tabloid* he frustrates Robert Kennedy's anti-mob efforts and encourages the JFK assassination; in *Underworld* he is opposed to the masses as he knows them. He is vicious and cruel: the associated bestial imagery and sounds say as much in *Nixon*, and DeLillo has Hoover entertain all form of random sadistic fancies. Also, he is indolent and corrupt: Stone has Hoover portrayed as a keen powerbroker and effete man of luxury; Summers suspects him of accepting many gifts in exchange for influence; *American Tabloid* reveals him to be a ludicrous gossip and voyeur; and DeLillo emphasizes his affections for high society. Finally, and most noticeably, Hoover is always the autocrat or monarch--the authority who answers to no one.

All this is in strict observance of the tyrant play, which, as Lindenberger relates, "is about the fall or the ultimate impotence of a tyrant" (40). This begins to approach the moral and political dimension of the Hoover metanarrative, for the failure or demise of the tyrant signals the point that, to use *Underworld*, Hoover's power is shown to be rooted in compulsive and sickly urges. It's a moral distinction, as in *Official and Confidential*, where the Hoover of historic record and national esteem is unmasked, most ironically, as a hypocrite and homosexual. "A play detailing his complete and unqualified triumph would not only violate an audience's moral sensibilities but would give the impression of a crude joke which has yet to be resolved," says Lindenberger. DeLillo's ambivalent conclusion to Hoover offers just such a crude joke in the form of twinning Edgar, and making his "sister" his truly devout and ethically-concerned opposite. The more seriously dramatic Hoover narratives, *Nixon* and *American Tabloid*, conclude very starkly, Hoover going unrepentant and unpunished; Summers,
instead, utilizes the biographical form to effect by ending with the tyrant's funeral.

All of the narratives reflect the matter of impotence that Lindenberger raises, "a ready-made device in the sense that [dramatists] could undercut a tyrant's public triumph with his powerlessness in love" (40). With Hoover the twist is that the reader is informed, ad nauseam sometimes, that his sexuality is deeply frustrated and repressed. This helps to ameliorate a reader's disappointment when Hoover is not served punishment for his tyranny. Instead, there is the poetic justice of his own personal abnegation at the hands of urges too impolite or taboo for the social orthodoxy he endorses and helps maintain. The resulting comic caricature for Ellroy is "a limp-wristed Fascist in jackboots and lavender lederhosen," whose desires are confined to his dirty habits of voyeurism and rumour-mongering (286). DeLillo vividly jokes in a similar vein: "Whatever Edgar's own claim to rank and notoriety, he found himself subject to anal flutters when chatting with a genuine celeb" (557). These comic passages, among others, provide moments of relief from these narratives' treatment of darker aspects to Hoover. They similarly underwrite the moral sensibility which bridges all the narratives.

Hutcheon has proposed that behind the symbolic structure of historical narrative lies political intent.16 White agrees that the rationale "for choosing one perspective on history rather than another [is] ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological ..." (Metahistory xii). In the case of the Hoover metanarrative, theme is fleshed out by emplotment, Hayden White's term for how plot structures produce meaning.17 Emplotment attempts to derive affective reactions from the reader: it "charges our thoughts ... with different emotional valences" (Tropics 91). The composite portrait of

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16 "We may no longer have recourse to the grand narratives that once made sense of life for us, but we still have recourse to narrative representations of some kind in most of our verbal discourses, and one of the reasons may be political" (Hutcheon Politics 49).
Hoover these texts create is made clearer by "their resemblance to timeless archetypal stories," such as the tyrant play (Figural 76); similarly, Hoover’s resemblance to archetypal tyrants familiarizes him to the reader as a recognizable character type.

As the germ and inspiration for the film and novels to follow, Official and Confidential’s importance cannot be overestimated to the larger character conception which has evolved, and Summers’ imaginative account of Hoover’s peccadilloes is a case study in the bias of emplotment. His “morality play” had bite and wicked appeal: “The image of a homosexual Hoover dressed in drag was so outrageous that it was too good a story to disbelieve” (Theoharis 20, 13). Theoharis’ description—too good a story to disbelieve?—gives reason for pause. “Too dramatic to disbelieve” would be more apt: the stark contradiction between the public Hoover and the private renders him a familiar character, Theoharis offers, reminiscent of other media spectacles of “exposed moralistic charlatans” like Jim Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart.17 “Nothing is missing ...” (42), in other words, and this portrayal fits the larger psychodrama which Summers conjures up.

One scholar—hardly a careful reader of Summers’ spurious evidence—makes an excited rush to judgement, conjecturing that few “have seemed to appreciate how exemplary his story is” (Dumm united 75). Blithely calling Summers’ interpretation “Hoover’s story,” he proceeds to rail against the Official and Confidential-penned hypocrite as a paradigmatic “[n]arcissistic fascist,” going so far as to say Americans “are [still] haunted because we have not faced his heritage, a heritage of secrecy and power” (76, “Trial”

17 Succinctly defined, emplotment describes “the ways in which a specific plot type ... can simultaneously determine the kinds of event to be featured in any story that can be told about them and provide a pattern for the assignment of roles that can possibly be played by the agents and agencies inhabiting the scene thus constituted” (Figural 32).

18 “What’s more, the ‘outed’ Hoover contrasted starkly with the self-important image cultivated by the publicity-conscious FBI director: a stern puritan, lecturing the public on the immorality of illicit sex and warning of the perils of abandoning traditional family values. With Summers’s revelations, Hoover seemed to fall into the company of other recently exposed moralistic charlatans (Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart) who had been caught in the same illicit sexual activities they hypocritically decried. In Hoover’s case, his sins were compounded by disclosures that he had maintained secret dossiers on the sexual indiscretions of prominent Americans—including presidents, a First Lady, cabinet officials, and members of Congress” (Theoharis 13-14).
Although the critic provides some illuminating observations about Hoover’s legacy as a prominent American figure, he also runs roughshod over the established conversation about Hoover since Summers, eager to join in the vilification. Caught up in Summers’ tendentious story, this unassuming scholar is perhaps the ideal Official and Confidential reader, captivated by its skillful emplotment of the morality play and its archetypal thematics of the tyrant.

This example begs the more interesting question of the underwriting political bias of this anti-Hoover rhetoric of Summers and others. Their pop analysis of Hoover’s narcissistic fascism, or other such related pathologies, is itself a loaded and inelegantly-shaded notice of political affiliation. The psychological dramatizations evinced throughout the Hoover metanarrative are the diagnoses of would-be gadflies: even DeLillo’s account, the most measured of the group, makes glaring notice of its leftist affinities by posing Hoover’s megalomania unfavourably against a sixties-era populist consciousness. An earlier Hoover biographer states that he was “as much hated by the left as he was loved by the right” in his own lifetime: this dichotomy has by and large persisted (491). In a remarkable turn of mixed metaphor, a Republican congressman contended in 1972 that Hoover “seems to thrive ... on the barbs of these left-wing foul balls who have been trying to lay a glove on him” (qtd. in Gentry 58). Hoover’s reply was a tacit agreement: “Mr. Chairman, I have a philosophy. You are honoured by your friends and you are distinguished by your enemies. I have been very distinguished.”

American conservatives were among the quickest to subject Official and Confidential to critical scrutiny. Their defensive vigilance helps body

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19 “Adopting the techniques of the organizers of Bible schools to the bureaucracy of justice, understanding the importance of the development of the cult of personality and using it to his fullest advantage, absolute in his moral fervor, yet never moving beyond the sanctioned approval of those president whom he hated (absolute in fervor, but when the crunch came, always willing to compromise), Hoover developed the ‘Americanism’ that informed right and wrong in the prosecution and punishment of law offenders for half a century” (Dumm, united 75-76).
forth the implicit politics of Hoover revisionism. In a barely veiled attack on the mass media’s ideological standpoint, William F. Buckley wonders why, in the open competition of sundry conspiracy theories, those involving the Right are given more attention: “How is it that a story that contains all the above about Monroe-Kennedy, Kennedy-FBI-mob, gets less attention than the inherently preposterous proposition that J. Edgar Hoover went to parties at the Plaza Hotel in drag?” (79). In his book-length response to Summers, Cartha DeLoach proves unable to restrain his political allegiances, castigating the American Left for being “ideologically predisposed” to render Hoover “the devil incarnate,” and to wax poetic on the so-called secret files as “evidence of his hypocrisy and malevolence” (32). He bemoans the widespread portrayal of Hoover “as an icon of oppression” and that “[h]is name has become a punch-line” (61), arguing persuasively that political partisanship is to blame.

“What an amazing accomplishment this is for Anthony Summers,” DeLoach marvels only half-sarcastically, “the disingenuous biographer who has almost single-handedly propagated the absurd story that J. Edgar Hoover was a cross-dressing homosexual.” He claims irreparable damage to Americans’ popular conceptions of Hoover and to his legacy generally: when “he is thought of years from now, Hoover will probably be remembered as the highest-ranking official in government to have dressed in drag.” Yet DeLoach does not take notice of the pursuant historical narratives which have seen Summers’ characterization through, reinforcing its emplotment and characterization with their own particular perspectives. Their contribution as a whole yields what I have been calling the Hoover metanarrative, the account of the stories of Hoover being told in recent American film and fiction. Quite simply, the function of political views cannot be overestimated as the driving motivation and basis for Hoover revisionism: nor can the attendant historical context in which Hoover lived be overlooked,
for it has also been perceptibly updated, rewritten for the new Hoover of historical speculation.
Hoover is still an object of contestation in American political life, although it's clear his legacy will never be the same as before Official and Confidential. It's more than a curious similarity that his career beliefs have fared little better—Hoover is presently remembered largely as an ideological menace of the cold war era. The Hoover narratives of Stone, Ellroy, and DeLillo go further, drawing on Summers' caricature of frustrated repression as explanation for his reprehensible politics. And so, on the one hand, the caricature of Hoover the frustrated tyrant advances, on the other, the critique of his historical actions and beliefs. Despite the dissenting voices of conservatives like DeLoach, it is difficult if not impossible to argue that Hoover's own political and moral philosophies have fallen hopelessly out of date, becoming distastefully recondite. Baldly anti-constitutional rhetoric of the "dictatorship of the collective conscience of the people" could not pass muster today.

No thanks to Summers, Hoover's conservative credentials have suffered terribly, and in an ironic reversal he and Clyde Tolson have been appropriated by the American gay rights community. "Yanking J. Edgar and Clyde flamboyantly out of the closet and waving their relationship with the rainbow flag," as some gay community figures have begun to do, dramatizes the extent to which Hoover and his lifelong political agendas have been turned upon him in death (Hyena). The present resonance of such an image of the ousted Hoover, among those detailed in the aforementioned novels and film, reveals him to be a farcical figure, even a parody of closeted sexuality.²⁰

²⁰ This is not to say there has not been a measure of backlash, too. Perceiving hypocrisy, a confused DeLoach bristles at the thought that other historical homosexuals are celebrated, while the suspected Hoover gets castigated by Summers, and applauded for it. "Had [Summers] so treated any other homosexual couple of that era, he would have been attacked by every politically correct reviewer in the country for being 'homophobic.' Yet, since the subject here is J. Edgar Hoover, these same reviewers have been among Summers' most ardent admirers" (66). He anguishes that the demonization of Hoover has successfully alienated "his natural constituency—the straight conservative community." DeLoach despises the accusation of
This is a fitting fate that bespeaks gay rights advances, at least in North America, and the contemporary climate of sexual politics: in a carnival-esque reversal, the once tyrant ideologue of heterosexual conduct has become usurped, disdained as a psychologically-disturbed misfit according to today's sexually orthodox behaviour. As in the conventional turns of historical drama, the archetypal tyrant has been disarmed as figuratively impotent.

Hence with Summers' biography there is the funny and ironic disjunction of the strait-laced Hoover returning to posthumous fame as the subject of sexual innuendo and speculation in a cultural climate, needless to say, radically different from his own. One scholar of biography wonders how political figures' reputations are affected by sexual exposé-driven pathographies like Official and Confidential: "Does the examination of sexuality, from any perspective, contribute to an understanding of a political personality, or can we count on a person's political acts being trivialized by the sensationalism that so often accompanies emphasis on sexuality?" (McFeely 58). The example of Hoover is illustrative of how similar the available recent narratives of Hoover are upon inspection. If the Hoover narratives already discussed somehow help a reader understand Hoover's political views, they do so according to the aforementioned emplotment that characterizes Hoover as a tyrant figure. And so there is little room for distinguishing interpretations between, say, DeLillo and Stone: both Nixon and Underworld are underwritten by dramatic and archetypal conventions which make seeing Hoover as heroic, for example, impossible.

Hoover's posthumous decline into disrepute also compromises the ideological principles he once emblematically aspired to represent. A thorough critique of Hoover is necessarily a critique of the postwar times he sought to personify. He was, for one thing, a national authority on "the cold war rhetoric that conflated homosexuality with communism" (Edelman 268), homosexuality generally, calling it a "kind of smear." In a final bit of comic homophobic rhetoric, DeLoach compares Hoover to Summers: "He was certainly more of a man than Mr. Summers, and I've seen both at close quarters" (63).
and he zealously—and famously—evangelized about the evils of both. In another respect, his vigorous persecution of un-American activities was based on “a concern that had served implicitly to support the ideological construction of American nationalism at the end of the forties and throughout the fifties” (268-69). Hoover’s famed files were a study in establishing links between private behaviour and public lives, an attempt to root out the un-American element wherever it existed. Even putting the larger legacy of McCarthyism aside, Hoover’s abuse of office in this regard is legendary. Underworld pokes fun at Hoover’s notorious and legion prejudices: “She was in the files in a fairly big way. She’d been accused at various times of being a lesbian, a socialist, a communist, a dope addict, a divorcee, a Jew, a Catholic, a Negro, an immigrant and an unwed mother. Just about everything Edgar distrusted and feared” (561).

Significantly, DeLillo’s Hoover is vilified as a consummate domestic manifestation of cold war culture. In Underworld’s revisionist history, Hoover represents the apotheosis of what Michael Rogin has described as “[c]old war consensus” (2). It is his “presence [that] introduces an element of paranoia to a narrative that seems to be about the easy familiarity of community” (Parrish 705). Hoover’s ideological line, according to DeLillo, finds its fullest expression in the rhetoric of cold war history, in which “a form of national consensus is not so much a result of a natural unity as a product of there being a definite and coherent enemy ...” (Knight 817).

DeLillo’s interpretation is a considered and sophisticated one, for it engages Hoover’s fastidiously militant concerns for his country while showing the outsized abuses of power that such concern rationalizes. It also pointedly dates Hoover as an intransigent relic of an earlier era, counterposed to the critical consciousness and sixties rebelliousness the novel blatantly favours. The culture of the cold war, argues one scholar, is basically “[t]he relationship between the split cultures of consensus and
dissent ...” (Hendrickson xxi). In this novel’s thematic shorthand, Hoover is made indistinguishable from the forces of mass oppression.

The fate of J. Edgar Hoover--his second act as a cultural symbol--remains singularly remarkable. Elaborating on Summers’ idea of Hoover as moral charlatan, the other narratives all take pains to reflect dissenting opinions of a one time American hero. In the way these narratives transmit cultural knowledge of an American present’s distance from its past, Hoover revisionism is aiding the articulation of national and generational identity. The Hoover metanarrative, in attempting to establish a kind of historical knowledge, enjoins cultural dialogue and criticism. This phenomenon seems to represent a genuine American jeremiad of recent years, the social rite Sacvan Bercovitch has asserted to be characteristic of and integral to the development of American cultural thought. “The American jeremiad was a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal,” Bercovitch writes, “public to private identity, the shifting 'signs of the times' to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols” (American xi). This seems as apt a description of the moral and political ends of the Hoover metanarrative: the process by which a contrarian vision of an established cultural figure is expressed, through artful emplotment and archetypal characterization, and eventually absorbed as conventional wisdom. In this way “the radical energies” of cultural dissent effect social change (205), directing “a process of symbol making through which the norms and values of a modern culture [are] rationalized ...” (Assent 12).

Such has been the example of Hoover’s declining reputation and questionable legacy. In a very simple but crude way, the idea of Hoover has been hijacked by a most basic of cultural needs: the dependence on, as cited earlier, “mythologised accounts of individual lives for the transmission of moral and cultural values” (Evans 3). For example, DeLillo’s interest in the Hoover jeremiad seems invested in a larger historical revisioning of the culture of the cold war. No surprise then that the Hoover jeremiad emerged
from the pages of biographical speculation; Lionel Trilling offers in a related tangent that "the most effective [modern] agent of the moral imagination has been the novel ..." (222). Perhaps it is now closer to the truth to suspect that the media spectacle—or its poorer textual imitation, pathography—represents the most effective agent for entertaining and influencing social impressions of morality. As far as emplotment shapes the interpretation of a narrative, White is right to ask if "we [could] ever narrativize without moralizing?" (Content 25).

"The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it," Oscar Wilde advises (qtd. in Hutcheon, Poetics 96). Historical consciousness may have not been faithful to the lived version of Hoover's life, but it has apparently given voice to a latent musing in the contemporary American popular imagination. This is a suggestive possibility, and worth critical attention. Historical revisionism, after all, speaks less to its putative subject, whatever that may be, and more to the preoccupations and characteristics of those who indulge in it. "Deciding to remember, and what to remember," the poet Robert Pinsky recently remarked, "is how we decide who we are."
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