

Title	On the importance of impostors. Orson Welles' F for Fake as Nietzschean film?
Authors	MagShamhráin, Rachel
Publication date	2021
Original Citation	MagShamhráin, R. (2021) 'On the importance of impostors. Orson Welles' F for Fake as Nietzschean film?', Germanistik in Ireland, 16, pp. 67-78.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.hartung-gorre.de/Ireland_16.htm
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Download date	2025-05-20 06:22:22
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/12327



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On the Importance of Impostors

Orson Welles' *F for Fake* as Nietzschean Film?

The Impostor is the blender par excellence. She is both herself and someone else, and therefore properly neither. As a rejection of the limits between I and Other, her actions might be embraced as an ultimate form of kinship, but are often frowned upon, particularly in the world-as-law, and in an age of identity politics which encourages the dissolution of identity while simultaneously censoring its usurpation. A sense of imposture is something with which many (particularly female) academics will be intimately familiar. It is part of that 'bad conscience' (which Nietzsche describes in his *Genealogy of Morality* of 1887 as an anger directed towards the self, a "Selbstpeinigung"¹) that emerges from the foundational principle of originality of thought on which academia has erected itself, an originality enshrined in the tabernacle of the monograph. This essay speaks directly to its author's on-going imposture, and concomitant "Selbstpeinigung", but in the hope of redeeming impostors and their work for the academy.

With this in mind, I examine here the concept of the fake; specifically, how it is harnessed, or rather borrowed, by Orson Welles in his film *F for Fake* (1974) to take issue with the idea of originality, and its supposed corollary, truth. While the association of truth with originality may seem quaintly old-fashioned in an age of infinite digital reproducibility and enhanceability, it is a stubborn association, nonetheless. Perhaps precisely because truth in a virtual era is in a state of infinite regress, we presume now more than ever upon that alliance of truth and art that Keats so adamantly expressed as "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."² It is an equation the fame-hungry Romantics extended to include originality. In other words, to borrow from C.S. Lewis, not only is beauty synonymous with truth, but "in literature and art [...] if you simply try to tell the truth [...] you will, nine times out of ten, become original."³ According to this prevailing syllogism, no great art can be false, and no great art can be unoriginal; there-

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche: "Genealogie der Moral". In: Friedrich Nietzsche: *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe (KSA)*. Ed. by Giorgio Colli, Mazzino Montinari. Vol. II/2. Berlin, München: de Gruyter, 2010, p. 297.

² John Keats: "Ode on a Grecian Urn". In: John Keats: *The Complete Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988, p. 334.

³ Quoted in Corey Latta: *C. S. Lewis and the Art of Writing*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016, p. 165.

fore, great art is always both original and true, and, in fact, art, truth and originality are coterminous. It is a notion perpetuated by the academy, expressed, amongst other things, as an antipathy to plagiarism. And on the art market, as an antipathy to fakes. In both cases, the untrue is understood by self-appointed custodians of beauty and art to be a crime.

Welles is not interested in the crime of fakery as such, turning his attention instead to the moment of “discovery” of fakery, when the fake is declared to be or revealed as a fake. This, according to Welles’ 1974 essay film, is the real crime because it places the fake back in an unwinnable truth-game, or under the sign of truth. The moment of discovery – the resumption of disbelief, as it were – returns the fake to a pre-Nietzschean world demarcated by discourses of truth and reality and originality. Importantly, however, it is a world in which we are condemned to an eternal state of mourning for these lost (because ultimately unattainable) things. In *Cinéma 2*, Gilles Deleuze reads Welles’ work as Nietzschean in precisely this sense. But this contribution re-examines Deleuze’s Nietzschean reading of Welles, arguing instead that the final scene of the film belies this interpretation. Welles, according to Deleuze, escapes or by-passes the doubt-certainty, truth-lies, illusion-real dichotomies that have marked Western thought since Plato, demonstrating the inapplicability and danger of these tropes, and demonstrating the existentially vital life-affirming escape-artistry offered by illusion.

Orson Welles’ 88-minute film-essay about truth and lies, *F for Fake*, almost the last film he was to complete, started life very differently. It began as a more or less straightforward BBC documentary project by the French film-maker François Reichenbach about a prolific Hungarian-born art forger going by the name of Elmyr de Hory, who had at various points in his life also used the pseudonyms Elmyr Herzog, Elmyr Hoffman, Baron Elmyr von Houry, Louis Cassou and Joseph Dory, to name but a few, and if sources are to be believed. When he came to Reichenbach’s attention in 1969, Elmyr, as we shall call him for convenience,⁴ was living in not inconsiderable if borrowed style on the island of Ibiza, enjoying the celebrity of a *succès de scandale*. His new-found fame, or notoriety, as some might prefer to see it, was due in part to his arrest the previous year by Spanish police on a range of rather risible charges including homosexuality, consorting with known criminals, and having no visible means of support, for which convictions he served a jail sentence of a few months. In fact, these charges were incidental, but the only ones for which the authorities had any evidence. His real crime lay in his genius for artistic replication, which is harder to pinpoint. Elmyr was only able to paint passably well

⁴ His real name is possibly Elemer Albert Hoffmann, at least according to documents ‘discovered’ in a French farmhouse in 2011. Source apocryphal. See Eve M. Kahn: “Gleaning the True Identity of an Enigmatic Forger”. In: *New York Times*, 07.04.2011, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/08/arts/design/elmyr-de-horys-real-identity-its-becoming-less-of-a-mystery.html> (accessed 04.10.2021).

in his own right, or at least the art market thought so, but could produce extraordinary and extraordinarily convincing works in the unique style of various great artists.

This is, of course not a crime in itself (and was therefore also something he never openly denied). But it became one by an extension of that same uncanny gift for imitation: Elmyr was also able to replicate accurately the signatures of the famous artists whose styles he mimicked. Specifically, it was these autographs that were the site of the crime in a way, for it was their addition – this underwriting of the painting with a forged name – that brought the act into the domain of the law, acting as it did as an affidavit of authenticity. (Lacanian might see this act of introducing names and therefore language to the painting as necessarily involving an entry into the symbolic and therefore legal order.) At any rate, these names made marketable fakes of what otherwise would have been nothing more than derivative paintings. The canvasses were transformed by the magic of the signature into items of huge artistic and monetary value and thus judicial concern, and were sold on as the newly discovered works of famous artists by dealers who were only too willing to suspend any disbelief about their provenance. So, it was at the point of signature that things became serious, and therefore, of course, the addition of artists' signatures was a point on which the otherwise dangerously garrulous Elmyr needed to remain prudently silent.⁵

As Walter Benjamin pointed out in his essay on Baudelaire, the signature is one of “the most decisive of all conquests of a person’s incognito”,⁶ surpassed only by the photographic or mechanical reproduction. While Benjamin correctly recognizes the signature’s identificatory and thus policing power, this power is, of course, one that is only vested in the signature and not a power of the signature *per se*. For, as Derrida points out, the signature does not actually, as it promises to, bind expressions of whatever form to their one true source or origin. Although the signature claims and underwrites uniqueness of origin, in fact, the very singularity and originality that signatures seem to vouchsafe, is, says Derrida in “Signature, Event, Context” (1971), precisely impossible, amongst other things because a signature, in order to be authentic and authenticated, has to be repeatable, which implies that it

⁵ *F for Fake* 01:03:41–01:05:37.

⁶ “Am Anfang des Identifikationsverfahrens [...] steht die Personalbestimmung durch Unterschrift. In der Geschichte dieses Verfahrens stellt die Erfindung der Photographie einen Einschnitt dar. Sie bedeutet für die Kriminalistik nicht weniger als die des Buchdrucks für das Schrifttum bedeutet hat. Die Photographie ermöglicht zum ersten Mal, für die Dauer und eindeutig Spuren von einem Menschen festzuhalten. Die Detektivgeschichte entsteht in dem Augenblick, da diese einschneidende aller Eroberungen über das Inkognito des Menschen gesichert war.” Walter Benjamin: “Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire”. In: Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 1. Ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1989, pp. 511–604, here p. 550.

is reproducible. “In order to function, that is, in order to be legible, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to detach itself from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, in altering its identity and singularity, divides the seal.”⁷

In an earlier and different kind of discourse on the question of the signature as evidence, Jeremy Bentham’s “Modes of Authentication in the Case of Written Evidence” [pub. 1843] also recognized that scientifically establishing identity on the basis of handwriting relied somewhat paradoxically on reproducibility – at least two samples of the same hand need to be compared (“similitude of hands”).⁸ In other words, in order to function as a mark of singularity, the same signature needs to be reproduced identically at least twice; preferably, of course, by the same person, but quite possibly by the successful, that is to say, undiscovered, forger. For our context, it is interesting to note that it is the signature itself then that provides the possibility of forgery inasmuch as it is a reproducible singularity, the point at which the ideas of the unique and the copy are of critical importance and at the same time seem to collapse into one another. In other words, while the juridico-legal status of the signature as proof of identity is what made a crime of Elmyr’s paintings, ironically, it is the signature’s reproducibility (the fact that it has to be an ongoing facsimile of itself, allowing copyability), that allowed the fraud in the first place. Were it not for the authenticity-granting power of signatures, there would be no fraud.

So, the police had no real evidence that Elmyr had perpetrated any acts of fraud. How could they? In the hands of such a master craftsman, who could tell the original signatures from the fakes anyway? And Elmyr’s crime only really mattered to any of the parties involved if and when the deception was exposed. Until such time, there was no depreciation of the canvasses’ value, no harm to the experts who had staked their reputations on their authenticity, no harm to the viewer, no victim, therefore no injury, and by extension, arguably, no crime.

To the contrary. So great was the enthusiasm of dealers at the prospect of finding new paintings by old Masters (and selling them), that experts allegedly validated thousands of these canvasses as authentic, and subsequently, as we have seen, refused to testify against Elmyr lest the aura of their expertise evaporate in the criminal dock. Thus, on countless museum walls (or so Elmyr claims in Welles’ borrowed documentary footage), were hanging and probably still hang Elmyr Monets, Elmyr Manets, Elmyr Picassos and Elmyr Modiglianis. Of course, just how many famous fakes were and are hanging where, is impossible to tell not only because of

⁷ Jacques Derrida: “Signature, Event, Context”. In: Jacques Derrida: *Basic Writings*. Ed. by Barry Stoker. Transl. by Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 105–134, here p. 132.

⁸ Jeremy Bentham: “Modes of Authentication in the Case of Written Evidence”. In: John Bowring (published under the superintendence of his executor): *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*. Vol. VII. Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838–1843, pp. 175–180, here p. 177.

the purported quality of the forgeries and the signatures, but because Elmyr was as inventive with his own biography as he was with his canvasses, and was aided and abetted in his autobiographical flights of fancy by an accomplice worthy of himself, a man who was only introduced to the film's plot as a character in his own right when Welles took over the production.

When Elmyr was released from jail a few short months after his arrest, his exploits brought him to the attention not only of Reichenbach, but also an American author, Clifford Irving, also an *habitué* of Ibiza and (apparently, at least: creative splicing may have been involved) one of Elmyr's exasperated interlocutors in a central sequence in which Elmyr remains stubbornly silent on the question of signatures. Irving befriended Elmyr, interviewing him for Reichenbach's "original" BBC documentary, and then published the interviews himself in 1969 in a work entitled *Fake!*, a title that would all too soon have quite different significance for its author. It is at this point that the Wellesian phase of the film begins: the tale of Elmyr as filmed by Reichenbach is interwoven in Welles' montage with that of Elmyr's biographer, Irving who, perhaps inspired by his former subject's successes, went on to become a forger in his own right, but a literary one.

In 1972, shortly after completing his book on Elmyr, Irving became embroiled in a scandal for which he served 17 months in prison. He had received the then enormous advance of \$750,000 from publishing house McGraw-Hill for an authorized biography of the recluse billionaire Howard Hughes, whom, according to Irving, he had met amongst some pre-Aztec ruins in Mexico to clinch the deal. Apparently, in 1970 Irving had sent Hughes a copy of his Elmyr book, his "true tale of a Hungarian art forger," as he called it, allegedly prompting Hughes to write back and suggest a similar work on his own life. In this letter, forged by Irving on yellow legal pad, perhaps even (if not probably) with the help of the handwriting expert Elmyr, Hughes interestingly draws parallels between himself and the Hungarian con-artist, which should perhaps have alerted readers to the fact that Irving's Hughes was as much an invention as Elmyr's own persona. In the words of the letter if not of Hughes himself: "It seems to me that you have portrayed your man with great consideration and sympathy, when it would have been tempting to do otherwise. For reasons you may readily understand, this has impressed me."⁹

The choice of Hughes as a subject was ingenious on Irving's part. It would be difficult to prove any fraud when the subject himself was so notoriously withdrawn and unlikely to be available for verification. In a version of Russell's hypothetical teapot circling the sun, Hughes' secret life meant that little was definitively known

⁹ It becomes a little bit difficult for the present author to provide accurate citations for Hughes' work as publication data is made problematic by the fact that this was a hoax. Clifford Irving [and "Howard Hughes"]: *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes. Confessions of an Unhappy Billionaire*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1971. Cited here from the Kindle edition from 2021 (using the 1999 edition), p. 4.

about him, making inventions both possible, plausible, and indeed desirable, for there is nothing like a gap to generate an interest in filling it. It was also difficult to uncover Irving's forgery because, as a *Time Magazine* article of early 1972 pointed out, its "atmosphere of verisimilitude" came not from the pieces of supporting evidence presented by Irving, but rather from "the words in the manuscript itself. Several experienced editors and publishers at McGraw-Hill and LIFE magazine had read Irving's work and found it convincing in its tone [...]. It had an undeniable smack of authenticity."¹⁰ Ironically, this very authenticity of tone and wording was due to the fact that the forgery was a double fraud, its verisimilitude apparently further increasing its remove from originality. Irving had, namely, not only lied about his subject, and forged Hughes' signature; he had stolen much of the detail that lent the work its convincing aura from a text by a certain James Phelan. Phelan had ghostwritten an unpublished memoir about Hughes on behalf of Noah Dietrich, Hughes' former chief aide, CEO of his business empire, and custodian of what the world knew of his reclusive boss. The genius of Irving's theft was that, until their falling out in the late 1950s, Noah Dietrich had created, forged, as it were, his boss's entire public persona for him. So, what sounded like Dietrich, also automatically sounded like Hughes. As G. Thomas Couser puts it in his study of authority in autobiographical writing, *Altered Egos*:

Brusque, rude, and impatient, [Dietrich] is many things that Howard Hughes is not. But he had also been, for most of his working life, Howard Hughes's public stand-in. What the outside world had seen and known of Hughes had mostly come via Noah Dietrich [...]. All Clifford Irving needed to do was to put the thoughts of Noah Dietrich into the mouth of Howard Hughes (as Noah had done for so many years), and he had the material for a rich, literary property.¹¹

So, because the Hughes the world had known was never really himself to begin with, the invented Hughes of Irving and Dietrich had no original with which to compete. Hughes was a mere outline into which anything could be filled, forming the plausible substance of the figure.

In one particularly interesting passage of the biography, Irving has Hughes accuse his ex-aide Dietrich of being a liar, saying: "Noah Dietrich, now that he no longer works for me, has told story after story about our past business dealings where he's twisted things around."¹² A nice little touch, perhaps designed to put any detective off the scent of Irving's plagiarism of Dietrich via Phelan. But, as Irving himself put it to *TIME* magazine upon its discovery of the fraud, "It's more complex

¹⁰ "The Fabulous Hoax of Clifford Irving". In: *TIME* 99/8, 21.02.1972, pp. 12–21, here p. 12.

¹¹ G. Thomas Couser: *Altered Egos. Authority in American Autobiography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 296.

¹² Irving [and "Howard Hughes"]: *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes*, p. 278.

than you ever think. [...] You haven't seen the bottom line yet."¹³ One can only speculate about what Irving's deliberately cryptic remark meant – perhaps he was alluding to the ever-receding horizon of truth in postmodern times that is so often referred to, or maybe the infinite regress of veracity that the paradox of the forged forgery unleashes. At any rate, he was right about the situation's complexity.

For one thing, there was the conundrum posed by the artistic caliber of Irving's achievement. As *TIME* magazine remarked, noting the parallels between Irving and Elmyr de Hory, the forgery was undeniably superior not only to the original but also in comparison to Irving's real books.

One curiosity: the writing in the Irving manuscript is much better than that in the hastily drafted Phelan version. It is ironic that Irving may be more convincing as a forger than as an author in his own right – just as Elmyr de Hory, Irving's Ibiza friend and the main character in his book *Fake!*, is much better at doing Picassos and Modiglianis than he is at doing de Horys.¹⁴

And, if the Elmyr-Irving-Hughes situation weren't complex enough in itself, Welles' film about them deliberately introduces further complexity and uncertainty to the admixture. For one thing, the film's own originality and truth-content are foregrounded from the start as being highly questionable. The film opens with a magic trick, performed by Welles at a station, to an audience of a small boy. As Welles' scholar Jonathan Rosenbaum noted at time of the film's release, "a few rumblings have already been heard to the effect that *FAKE* is 'not really a Welles film.'"¹⁵ And in the strictest sense, it is not. Welles not only took over Reichenbach's documentary footage of Elmyr and Irving, but also completely reedited it, and filmed and inserted his own factual and fictional material.¹⁶

It is also important to note that Welles' version of the original is no longer a documentary about Elmyr. It is, in fact, a completely different genre of film, a film-essay, "a pure late-modern creation", according to András Kovács in *Screening Modernism* which focuses on putting forward a line of argument, while eschewing the "topochronological" conventions we associate with mainstream cinema.¹⁷

¹³ Time: *The Fabulous Hoax*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Time: *The Fabulous Hoax*, p. 15.

¹⁵ Jonathan Rosenbaum: "First Impressions of *F for Fake*". In: Jonathan Rosenbaum (ed.): *Discovering Orson Welles*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2007, pp. 51–53, here p. 51.

¹⁶ Ironically, in a mirror image of this, the footage from Welles' failed 1940s documentary about South America, which became a film essay on samba, was reedited and embedded into the 1993 Wilson-Meisel-Krohn documentary about Welles. The documentary maker entitled it *It's All True*.

¹⁷ András Bálint Kovács: *Screening Modernism. European Art Cinema, 1950–1980*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 117.

According to Peter Bogdanovich's description of the film, "it is as though you [had] said to Orson Welles, what do you have to say about the subject of fakery, art forgery, charlatanism, magicianship, the idea of authorship and experts[?]"¹⁸

The first part of the 88-minute film, lasting almost exactly 60 minutes, follows the original storyline to a degree, using the extraordinary events linking Elmyr, Irving and Hughes to reveal that everyone is a fake, from the so-called art experts who couldn't and/or wouldn't reveal the frauds, down to Welles himself. To establish Welles himself as a fraud, the film even includes an excerpt from the phony 1930s *War of the Worlds* broadcast, or at least it seems to, because, of course, the included excerpt is itself a fake, a reconstruction, matching none of the dialogue in the original. After this hour in which Welles has elegantly traced various patterns on this fabric of lies, we enter the film's second part, which Welles calls "a reenactment of recent history" (01:08:31–01:08:33). In these final 20 minutes or so, Welles seems to depart from the original plot entirely, telling the apparently true story of a summer love affair between Picasso and Welles' then mistress and costar of *F for Fake*, Oja Kodar. The affair, Welles tells us, resulted in "22 large portraits of Ms Oja Kodar [...] born under that virile brush" (01:15:20–01:15:28). When the affair ended, Welles explains, Kodar took the paintings with her, demanding that "all of those pictures, all 22 of them, were to be hers, outright, her property, Oja's very own, to pick up and carry away" (01:15:57–01:16:09). Not in the habit of donating paintings, Picasso had reluctantly bestowed them with the single caveat that none of them were ever to be sold (01:12:54–01:18:01). Picasso was then furious to discover a short time later that a new Picasso show was about to be held in Paris. Presuming the exhibited paintings to be those he had given to Kodar, he rushed there in a rage, but upon entering the exhibition was stunned to find that not one of the pictures over which all Paris was in a frenzy of admiration had been painted by him. "Critics were hailing the freshness, the force, the fecundity" (01:17:47–01:17:51) of this new Picasso period, but it was not his work. By way of explanation, Kodar promptly whisked the flabbergasted artist away to visit her dying grandfather, who, we are told, is coincidentally both a Hungarian and a forger just like Elmyr. Kodar's grandfather is, allegedly, the most masterful forger of his day, a positive Macavity amongst fakers, and has painted all these critically acclaimed new Picassos, burning the 22 real, not-for-sale Picassos given to Kodar. In this reenacted encounter between Grandfather Kodar and Picasso, with Welles playing Grandfather and Oja playing Picasso – and sometimes vice versa – the dying grandfather asks: "Do you think I should confess? To what? To committing masterpieces?" (01:23:49–01:23:55).

¹⁸ "Peter Bogdanovic on *F for Fake*", clip at: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3344-peter-bogdanovich-on-f-for-fake> (accessed 24.06.2021).

Then suddenly, three minutes from the end of the film, the real Welles interrupts the reenactment at Grandfather's deathbed-side to announce that it is "time for a confession. [...] For the past 17 minutes, I have been lying my head off" (01:26:36–01:26:40). Despite its similarities to the true, or at least truer, Elmyr story, the tale of the 22 Picassos and Oja's grandfather, is, he now claims, a complete fabrication. Welles however, excuses his deception, his departure from reality and seeming failure to uphold the promise he had made at the beginning of the film to base everything for "the next hour" strictly on the available facts. He argues against the imperative to be truthful and to represent reality faithfully, claiming that:

Reality is the toothbrush waiting at home for you in its glass. A bus ticket. A paycheck. And the grave. In the right mood perhaps, Elmyr has just as few regrets as I have to have been a charlatan. But we're not so proud either of us as to lay any superior claim to being very much worse than the rest of you. [...] What we professional liars hope to serve is truth. I believe the pompous word for that is "art". Picasso himself said it. "Art", he said, "is a lie, a lie that makes us realize the truth". (01:26:57–01:27:45).

This cannot fail to remind us of the famous passage from Nietzsche's *Nachlaß*: "Die Wahrheit ist häßlich. Wir haben die Kunst, damit wir nicht an der Wahrheit zugrunde gehn."¹⁹ Another version of the aphorism is offered in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1887), where honesty is described as bringing only "Ekel und den Selbstmord [...]. Nun aber hat unsere Redlichkeit eine Gegenmacht, die uns solchen Konsequenzen ausweichen hilft: die Kunst."²⁰ And had Welles encouraged us to place any trust in biographies, we might note at this point that, according to his biographers, Welles had read all of Shakespeare and much of Nietzsche even before he went to school at the age of ten. Allegedly.²¹

Biographical evidence for the Nietzsche connection aside, Gilles Deleuze saw Welles' treatment of truth as very much in the tradition of, if not borrowed directly from, Nietzsche, asserting in *Cinéma II* that

Orson Welles [...] makes the image go over to the power of the false. [...] There is a Nietzscheanism in Welles, as if Welles were retracing the main points of Nietzsche's critique of truth: the 'true world' does not exist, and, if it

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Anfang 1888–Anfang Januar 1889*. In Nietzsche: *KSA*. Vol. VIII. 1972, fragment no. 822, p. 269.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche: "Die fröhliche Wissenschaft". In: Nietzsche: *KSA*. Vol. III. 1980, pp. 343–638, here p. 464.

²¹ Erik Barnouw: *The Golden Web. A History of Broadcasting in the United States*. Vol. 2: 1933–1953. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 84.

did, would be inaccessible, impossible to describe, and if it could be described, would be useless, superfluous.²²

Or as Nietzsche had put it in a passage from his *Götzen-Dämmerung* (1895), “Die ‘wahre Welt’ – eine Idee, die zu nichts mehr nützlich ist, nicht einmal mehr verpflichtend – eine unnützlich, eine überflüssig gewordene Idee, *folglich* eine widerlegte Idee: schaffen wir sie ab!”²³ There are, in short, according to Deleuze, clear parallels between Nietzsche’s idea of truth as nothing more than a mobile army of metaphors,²⁴ and Welles’ self-deconstructing claim that “[in *F for Fake*] I said I was a charlatan and didn’t mean it [...]. I was faking even then. Everything was a lie. There wasn’t anything that wasn’t.”²⁵ But what do we gain by establishing a vague genealogy of ideas from Welles back to Nietzsche? According to Deleuze, at the moment when film puts truth into crisis, cinema has become Nietzschean, and, he says, this moment was brought about by, amongst others, Welles.

However, in the context of Welles’ alleged inauguration of a Nietzschean cinema under the sign of the false, we have to account for Welles’ openness about his fakery – for this truth is the one thing that does not fit with the whole programme of lying that we have uncovered here. And it is on this point that Welles’ project differs from those of Elmyr and Irving. It is his openness, I argue, that points us to the one real crime here.

Let us go back to our examination of when precisely a forgery becomes a crime: a forgery is, following Robert Hopkins’ definition “a work produced [...] with the intention that it pass for some other individual or as belonging to some type, where there is a practice of valuing such things [...] as the product of a certain agent.” He continues, “successful forgeries are those where the intention to mislead is itself successful.”²⁶ By this logic, there is no crime unless the forgery is *not* a success – for, as the value rests on the work’s attribution to an individual, only the discovery of fake agency could damage the work’s value. Equally and oppositely, a failed forgery would be a crime. In other words, the act of discovery is the problem, for it is this that causes the devaluation both of art, truth and expertise. And, so Hopkins’

22 Gilles Deleuze: *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*. Trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 137.

23 Friedrich Nietzsche: “Wie die ‘wahre Welt’ endlich zur Fabel wurde: Geschichte eines Irrtums”. In: Friedrich Nietzsche: *Götzen-Dämmerung. KSA*. Vol. VI. 1988, pp. 80f., here p. 81.

24 Friedrich Nietzsche: “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn”. In: Friedrich Nietzsche: *KSA*. Vol. I. 1967, p. 881.

25 Quoted in Joseph McBride: *What Ever Happened to Orson Welles? A Portrait of an Independent Career*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006, p. 247.

26 Robert Hopkins: “Forgery”. In: Stephen Davies, Kathleen Marie Higgins, Robert Hopkins, Robert Stecker, David E. Cooper (eds): *A Companion to Aesthetics*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009, pp. 287–289, here p. 287.

claim that “forging is wrong – or so [...] the sanctions against it suggest,”²⁷ would surely need to be rephrased as: ‘forging is wrong when discovered – and so the sanctions against it would seem to be sanctions rather against its discovery.’

Since Elmyr finally poisoned himself rather than face conviction for forgery (an ironic inversion of the death by self-poisoning of Socrates for a kind of pathological truthfulness), and we can discount Irving’s claims that he had always intended his fraud to be discovered, and that, as such, his biography of Hughes was not a fraud but a hoax, of our film’s three main charlatans, only one openly calls himself a liar, and as such is the only one who is engaged in a process of discovery and therefore is the only one who violates that sanction against discovery, committing a crime (albeit a Nietzschean crime). But what is that crime? According to Nietzsche this reentry into a discourse of truth and lies is a rejection of life:

Hätten wir nicht die Künste gut geheißen und diese Art von Cultus des Unwahren erfunden: so wäre die Einsicht in die allgemeine Unwahrheit und Verlogenheit, die uns durch diese Wissenschaft gegeben wird, nicht auszuhalten.²⁸

Disgust and suicide would necessarily follow in truth’s train. Or as Deleuze had put it: “The truthful man in the end wants nothing other than to judge life; he holds up a superior value, the good, in the name of which he will be able to judge, he is craving to judge, he sees in life an evil, a fault which is to be atoned for.”²⁹ Perhaps, as this is one of Welles’ last films (his second-last completed ‘feature film’), a film that is as much an autumnal lament for his lost youth as an exploration of a Nietzschean farewell to truth, this is the reason for his momentary reproach against life when he slips into truth-telling mode, and commits the real crime: the crime of genuineness. Or, in Deleuzian terms, our hero – namely Welles – in *F for Fake* is not actually that ‘hero of the power of the false’ that Deleuze would have us believe, but rather a more traditional Hollywood hero, the ‘man of truth.’

While both Deleuze and Jonathan Rosenbaum insist on Welles the faker, Rosenbaum calling his admissions “projects of candid concealment”,³⁰ and Deleuze claiming of this adamantly false cinema that “appearances betray themselves, not because they would give way to a more profound truth, but simply because they reveal themselves as non-true”,³¹ the final moments of this essay film or pseudo-documentary in which we have the *grande désillusion*, nevertheless refer to the illusory fraudulent nature of what has gone before as though from a point of truth, apparently turning Welles finally back into Deleuze’s truthful man, who “sees in life

²⁷ Hopkins: “Forgery”, p. 287.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche: “Die fröhliche Wissenschaft”. In: Nietzsche: *KSA*. Vol. II. 1988, p. 464.

²⁹ Deleuze: *Cinema 2*, p. 143.

³⁰ Rosenbaum: *Discovering Orson Welles*, p. 137.

³¹ Deleuze: *Cinema 2*, p. 143.

an evil, a fault which is to be atoned for: the moral origin of the notion of truth”,³² as opposed to a Nietzschean.

My question at the end of this contribution is why this volta, why this apparent reentry in the final scene of the film into a lethal truth paradigm, thereby betraying the higher falsity of a Nietzschean film essay? One is tempted to be biographical about it, and answer that Welles knew he would soon die, and so the life-affirming lie could be sacrificed. But sacrificed to what? What legacy does he leave us with this *grande désillusion*? In the film’s monologue about the anonymous collaborative achievement that is Chartres cathedral, Welles seems to offer us a possible reading:

And this has been standing here for centuries. The premier work of man perhaps in the whole Western world, and it’s without a signature: Chartres. A celebration to God’s glory and to the dignity of man. All that’s left, most artists seem to feel these days, is man. Naked, poor, forked radish. There aren’t any celebrations. Ours, the scientists keep telling us, is a universe which is disposable. You know, it might be just this one anonymous glory of all things, this rich stone forest, this epic chant, this gaiety, this grand, choiring shout of affirmation, which we choose when all our cities are dust, to stand intact, to mark where we have been, to testify to what we had it in us to accomplish.

Our works in stone, in paint, in print, are spared, some of them for a few decades or a millennium or two, but everything must finally fall in war or wear away into the ultimate and universal ash. The triumphs and the frauds, the treasures and the fakes. A fact of life. We’re going to die. “Be of good heart”, cry the dead artists out of the living past. Our songs will all be silenced – but what of it? Go on singing. Maybe a man’s name doesn’t matter all that much.³³

But at the film’s end, Welles has insisted on the individual of the signature and of truth and originality. It is as though he cannot bear to become like Chartres, of good heart and silent song. His name does matter.

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³² Deleuze: *Cinema 2*, p. 137.

³³ *F for Fake*, 01:05:44–01:08:17.