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F is for Fake: Welles Explores Truth in Deception

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Orson Welles' documentary *F is for Fake* is as much an exploration of one filmmaker's idiosyncratic technique, as it is a philosophical debate about authenticity and expertise.



COURTESY OF SPECIALTY FILMS

Released in 1974, *F is for Fake* is Orson Welles' last completed film — the culmination of an extensive and acclaimed career in artistic media. The beginning of Welles' work actually existed not in film, but rather in

theatre and radio. In 1937, Welles wrote a modern adaptation of and starred in William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Although it premiered in an independent theatre, Caesar was soon moved to Broadway, where it ran until 1941. Welles burst onto the radio platform when, in 1938, he delivered the infamous "War of the Worlds" broadcast. Despite its notoriety for the panic and widespread hysteria that it caused, this broadcast additionally served to exemplify and draw attention to Welles' skills in dramatic acting and oration. His talent would make him a household name a few years after the zenith of Welles' career, *Citizen Kane*. Widely regarded as one of the greatest works in the history of film, *Citizen Kane* depicts the life of the fictional Charles Foster Kane, played by Welles. His performance in this role is marked by moments of boisterous rhetoric as well as more nuanced scenes of passionate drama. Welles also directed and co-wrote *Citizen Kane*; The film's revolutionary fast-paced editing and montage segments exhibit Welles' unique cinematic vision and would influence not only his later work, but also the technique of many future directors. *Citizen Kane* was followed by several more notable films like *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Touch of Evil*. Welles passed away in 1985 at age 70.

F is for Fake primarily centers around the life of Elmyr de Hory, an infamous artist who made a career by forging precise copies of well-known paintings and drawings. Despite possessing a clear talent for artistic technique, a young Elmyr struggled with selling his own works and subsequently began forging other paintings to earn a living. However, even after his established success at forgery, he still lived in poverty, as the art dealers with whom he worked took the majority of the sale profits. In the 1960s, an aging and exasperated Elmyr was discovered in his forgery, after letting various slips in his works reveal his identity and the false nature of his paintings. During *F is for Fake*, Elmyr is found living in a villa on the Spanish island of Ibiza, leased to him by an art dealer. The film also introduces Clifford Irving, the author responsible for writing a biography of Elmyr. Incidentally, Irving has recently been involved in his own forgery scandal. Shortly before the filming of *F is for Fake*, Irving's biography of American businessman Howard Hughes was discovered to be fictionalized and completely unauthorized by Hughes, who was actually in a reclusive state during the book's writing. This prompted Welles to discuss the early origins of his own career, recalling the infamous "War of the Worlds" broadcast. The success and infamy of this broadcast relied upon the deception of individuals, much like Elmyr's paintings or Irving's biography. The documentary ends with a brief anecdote about Pablo Picasso and Welles' companion, Oja Kodar. At some point in his career, Picasso, moved by Kodar's beauty, created a series of paintings using her model and basis for creativity. Kodar insisted that she keep the paintings, promising Picasso that she would not sell them. Yet, Picasso soon reads newspaper articles about her successful new gallery in Paris, consisting of the paintings he created of Kodar. Furious, he travels to the gallery, where he discovers, upon examination, that he did not create any of the paintings hanging in the gallery; in fact, Kodar's grandfather copied all of the paintings, and the originals were burned.

This brief anecdote comprises the documentary's challenge to preconceived notions of authenticity. Although Picasso created the original paintings, the works of Kodar's grandfather are hanging, successfully, in the gallery. As the originals no longer exist, it can not be assumed that Picasso is the sole owner. There was a subtle difference between the copies and the originals and Picasso knew that the gallery paintings were not his. So was the gallery really an exhibition of Kodar, and not Picasso? Additionally, the art dealers of this gallery were unable to differentiate between a real and fake Picasso painting, challenging ideas about artistic expertise and originality. If no one else besides the painter and copier possess the insight into the legitimacy of the painting, perhaps there is no real difference between the original and "fake." This point is further complicated when Welles reveals that the anecdote is completely false. Had Welles not intentionally announced the lie, the anecdote would otherwise be completely true to those not directly involved.

Welles crafts this argument in his unique cinematic style, with editing and camera shots that create a fast-paced film. Different interviews are juxtaposed, forming vivid montages that are fast yet coherent. The documentary is narrated by Welles, who appears in scenes delivering his classic, dramatic oratory in *Citizen Kane* fashion. In these scenes, Welles guides the attention of the viewer through his complex yet stimulating argument against authenticity and expertise, simultaneously confusing and enlightening the viewer.

F is for Fake will be screened at Cornell Cinema Saturday, November 21 and Sunday November 22. Nick Swan is a freshman in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations. He can be reached at nicholasbswan@gmail.com.