



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

F for Fake

Introduced by Programmer-at-large, Geoff Andrew (Wednesday 9 March only)

In 1970 François Reichenbach, with the British journalist Richard Drewett, made *Elmyr: The True Picture?*, a 40-minute BBC documentary about Elmyr de Hory, the Hungarian faker of 20th-century masters, and his biographer Clifford Irving; Reichenbach asked Orson Welles to narrate it. Welles declined, but was predictably intrigued, on many levels, by the material. It touched him at many points: his own facility as a painter, his lifelong fascination with conjuring – with the art of illusion in all its forms, in fact – and his equally long-standing attraction (from *Citizen Kane* onwards) to biographical enquiry all chimed with him.

He may well have had occasion to ponder deeply on the question of what a man's life amounts to when, in August 1970, his Madrid villa burned down, wiping out many of his papers, screenplays, stories and sketches. And the subject of Reichenbach's film, the delicate question of authorship, which had dogged Welles from at least as far back as the famous *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938, now raised its head in particularly aggressive form with the publication, in successive issues of *The New Yorker* in February 1971, of two articles by Pauline Kael alleging that Herman Mankiewicz, Welles's credited co-author of the screenplay of *Citizen Kane*, had in fact written the whole thing. Welles was deeply upset by this allegation; Reichenbach's film now took on an urgent personal relevance for him.

Reichenbach had shown Welles the hour or so of footage that he had been unable to use; now he became seriously intrigued, asking Reichenbach to allow him to rework the material into a film of his own. Reichenbach not only agreed but offered to finance a 30-minute film through his own company Les Films du Prisme. Welles accordingly went to Ibiza to shoot new material with de Hory, and shot scenes in a Paris restaurant with himself and Reichenbach in discussion. But somehow the material failed to gel; Welles seemed to have reached an impasse and his initial enthusiasm petered out.

Then, in January 1972, sensational news broke: it was revealed that the autobiography of the notoriously reclusive Howard Hughes, whose sale had been brokered by none other than de Hory's biographer Clifford Irving, had in fact been forged by Irving himself. This news that the faker's biographer was himself a faker galvanised a delighted Welles, who instantly saw the potential for a movie in which nothing is as it seems – in which everything, in fact, is fake. This idea liberated him. He could use stock footage, footage he had shot himself for other purposes or no purpose at all. He would weave apparently disparate elements into a vivacious and completely non-linear essay on the idea of fakery, a dazzling scherzo on the theme of deception, at the still centre of which would be a meditation on the great cathedrals, built by unknown craftsmen. Who cares, asks Welles, who built Chartres? Its greatness is independent of its authorship.

For one of the most present of filmmakers, whose every frame proclaims his authorship of his film, whose performances overwhelmingly dominate his own work, whose bulky profile was among the best-known images of 20th-century culture, to make a film praising anonymity is just one of many pieces of

outrageous chutzpah in the film that finally became known as *F for Fake*. But beyond the question of authorship, beyond even the question of fakery, the film is above all a hymn to the art of editing – of which, from *Othello* onwards, Welles had become an absolute master. In that work, his editorial virtuosity derived partly from necessity – the film had to move fast because too often, in a movie shot on several continents over many years, the eye had to be distracted.

With Welles, filming and editing went hand in hand to an unusual degree; in *F for Fake* the editing preceded the filming: as the film took shape in the editing suite, Welles saw the direction the film was taking, and this dictated the shots he required. And as events in the external world unfolded, he was able to respond to them. He worked from 5am to 11pm every day, with up to three different editors, reeling off instructions as he passed from one editor to the next. He moved the film away from narrative towards pure prestidigitation. Its form, François Thomas and Jean-Pierre Berthomé observe, is *rhizomatic*, ‘like tubers that multiply underground throwing up roots, no one being more important than any other... The underlying thread of the film is the magician’s control over the credulous mind and its corollary – the desire to believe in the improbable.’

At the centre of it all is Welles the conjuror. In Henry Jaglom’s 1970 experimental film *A Safe Place* he had played a character known only as The Magician; he would do so in other films, in various different manifestations. But *F for Fake* is his magical apotheosis. Throughout the film, his sense of exhilaration in his own virtuosity is palpable: making it, he refound his almost childlike sense of joyous discovery, of naughty astonishment at what he could get away with. After *Citizen Kane*, *F for Fake* was the next best train set a boy ever had.

Gary Graver, his cinematographer on much of the film, describes how, when the money was running out, they improvised technical solutions, inventing the cinema as they went along, just as Griffith had done, as Gance had done with *Napoléon*. Graver, whose experience was essentially on low-budget (and fairly low-life) movies, was Welles’s ideal partner in filmmaking, ready to be told what to do by Welles, but endlessly inventive of means – cheap means – by which to achieve what he was asked for. Welles’s extraordinary ability to keep the whole film in his mind as he worked enabled him to create shots which would match the pre-existing footage. This godlike capacity to yoke together people who had been filmed years and sometimes oceans apart, defying time and space, is another element of the film’s quite extraordinary exhilaration. It feels like a young man’s film, not least in the director’s quite shameless desire to show off his sexy girlfriend [Oja Kodar] to the world.

Altogether, the film suggests a fresh wind from Welles, a rediscovery of his essential pleasure in filmmaking, and a giant stride in a new direction. He thought of it as the pioneering work in a new genre, one unique to him because it depended entirely on his personality to make it cohere. ‘I’m a better actor than I’m a director, and I’ve never had a chance to prove it,’ he told Bill Krohn in an interview in *Cahiers du cinéma*. ‘I’m very serious. I know that the thing I do best in the world is talk to audiences. And that’s what confuses me and makes me think I should have been in politics, which is nonsense... my favourite mask is myself. And I feel much more at ease on the stage talking to the audience than I do pretending to be someone else. With most actors it’s exactly the opposite.’

This slightly odd observation – surely what he is talking about has nothing to do with acting – is nonetheless disarmingly frank in its main point: all his career, Welles had been reaching out to the public, sometimes more successfully than at others. Since the late 1930s, in radio programmes, in newspaper columns, in speeches, on television, he had always been, as he puts it, trying to talk to audiences. He had always had this compelling need to address the public *in propria persona* – in the persona, that is, of a wise, benevolent, impassioned, ironic, wayward, quizzical interlocutor. In *The Fountain of Youth*, Welles as the storyteller relates both to the action and to the audience. He is not part of the story; he is the magician, summoning up these people and making them disappear again. He is the master of ceremonies. With *F for Fake* and his invention of the essay film, he combines all his impulses: the desire to instruct, to entertain, to bewitch, to tease. In it he triumphantly effects his escape from linear narrative, which has always been his enemy.

Simon Callow, *Sight & Sound*, September 2012

F FOR FAKE

A film by: Orson Welles
Production Companies: Films de l’Astrophore, SACI (Teheran), Janus Film und Fernsehen (Frankfurt)
Presented by: François Reichenbach
Producer: Dominique Antoine *
Associate Producer: Richard Drewett *
Screenplay: Orson Welles, Oja Kodar *
Photography (France/Ibiza): Christian Odasso
Photography (USA/Toussaint): Gary Graver
Editors: Marie-Sophie Dubus, Dominique Engerer
Assistant Editors: Anne-Marie Engerer, Dominique Boischot, Elisabeth Moulinier
Titles: Lax
Music: Michel Legrand
Sound Recording: Paul Bertault
Special Participants: Joseph Cotten, François Reichenbach, Richard Wilson, Paul Stewart, Sasa Devcic, Gary Graver, Andrés Vicente Gómez, Julio Palinkas, Christian Odasso, Françoise Widoff

Participants:
Orson Welles, Elmyr de Hory, Clifford Irving, Edith Irving, Richard Drewett, Nina Van Pallandt, Jean-Pierre Aumont, Laurence Harvey, Howard Hughes *

Off-screen Participation:
Peter Bogdanovich, William Alland
Introducing: Oja Kodar

France/Iran/West Germany 1973©
87 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

F for Fake
Fri 4 Mar 20:50; Wed 9 Mar 18:10 (+ Intro by Programmer-At-Large, Geoff Andrew); Wed 16 Mar 21:10
Nashville
Sat 5 Mar 19:45; Wed 9 Mar 14:15; Sun 13 Mar 18:00
Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (The Young Ladies of Rochefort)
Sun 6 Mar 13:15; Fri 11 Mar 18:05; Tue 15 Mar 18:10
8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)
Mon 7 Mar 20:15; Wed 16 Mar 17:50 (+ intro by Giulia Saccogna, BFI Programme & Research Coordinator)
Le Mépris (Contempt)
Tue 8 Mar 20:50; Sat 12 Mar 20:50
Baadasssss!
Thu 10 Mar 20:40; Sat 12 Mar 18:10
Cabaret
Sat 12 Mar 18:15
42nd Street
Mon 14 Mar 20:45

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at **bfi.org.uk/join**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on **player.bfi.org.uk**

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at **www.bfi.org.uk/signup**

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.