

The Truth about Forgeries and Fakes in Film

Julia Pfau

Film is the vehicle through which much of the information about fakes and forgeries is shared with the public. While art historians study the question in their research and publish scholarly works, the average person's understanding of such subjects is not as nuanced; the unrepresentative selection and dramatization of forgeries that films often offer leads to an overall inaccurate portrayal. There is therefore a divide between how forgers and forgeries are depicted in film as opposed to how they operate in real life.

As film is one of the main sources through which the general public learns about art forgery, accuracy is a critical issue. Fictional and documentary films convey to the viewers information about forgeries that they may not otherwise have known. The audience tends to assume that all films about art forgery truly represent how forgers act in real life. This is complicated by the generally accepted fact that films, both of fiction and documentary, tend to hyperbolize the facts for dramatic effect. In order to gauge the accuracy of films then, we must define the reality to which we are comparing the films. To help us in this task, I propose to ask the following questions: What are forgers and forgeries like in real life? How are forgers and forgeries depicted in film? The last question is why these differences matter for both the field of art history and for the understanding of the general public.

Before diving into fictional and documentary films, however, it is first important to establish what forgers are like in real life. Much of this information is accessible in Noah Charney's book, *The Art of Forgery*. Charney explains that art crimes relating to authenticity mostly fall into the categories of fakes and forgeries. These overarching categories are of course

represented in films, but they often fail to address subcategories of related offenses. For example, what Charney calls the “provenance trap” deals with the forgery of documents which purport to record the ownership history of a work (Charney 18) and is rarely represented in film. Charney also explains that known forgers are exclusively men who have been somehow rejected by the art world. They are motivated by their desire to rationalize that they are good artists, to show that the experts are foolish, and to sometimes gain fame or fortune. Charney describes that forgers seek to fly under the radar at least for a while before revealing ownership of their works, so they are more likely to forge the work of lesser-known artists.

Charney, however, overlooks some of the important harms of art forgery when he describes it as a virtually victimless crime. In fact, art forgery damages institutions like museums and galleries, as well as the reputations of people associated with them, as forgery manipulates our knowledge of what is authentic. Further, forgery similarly injures the study of art history in its infiltration of collections and archives; scholars and historians may study works that are not authentic, leading them to form conclusions that, unbeknownst to them, are illegitimate. This misrepresentation of knowledge damages our collective understanding of art history.

Documentaries about forgeries seem to be more common than fictional films about this topic, perhaps because real forgery cases are themselves so fascinating. Documentaries based on true stories, however, do not necessarily get forgers right, in part because they are not truly wholesale presentations of the truth. The fact is, as a genre, documentary film “always has two crucial elements that are in tension: representation, and reality. Their makers manipulate and distort reality like all filmmakers, but they still make a claim for making a truthful representation of reality” (Aufderheide 10). When film was first invented in the late 19th century, it was widely believed that the images were “the truth” because they mechanically captured a snippet of

reality. Film is a cousin of photography, both of which supposedly produce images of the real. The most important part of such inventions was believed to be their “‘factual’ or ‘truth telling’ nature: ‘the camera does not lie’” (Tyler 101). This is accurate at face value; the camera does produce an image of reality, but it does not convey the whole truth. Taking a picture or filming something always requires choices that ultimately exclude context and other crucial details.

Truth is precarious in filmmaking because of the plethora of choices the filmmaker must make, which inevitably weaken the objectivity of the film. Full objectivity in documentary film would require the portrayal of the truth or reality of a subject without influence from external sentiments. It is true that “a different camera angle presents a different ‘truth’ of an action, or—in showing another side of an object—presents a different truth or representation of that object” (Blumenberg 20). Similarly, Taihei Imamura and Michael Baskett explain that “if one cannot exhaustively document everything about an object regardless of how much film one uses, then the act of documentation itself means constantly choosing a single part of an object” (Imamura and Baskett 58). In limiting this process, documentaries run into a problem, maybe even a paradox, in that they purport to be conveying a true story, yet the whole truth can never be captured on film because of the necessary choices that filmmakers and photographers must make.

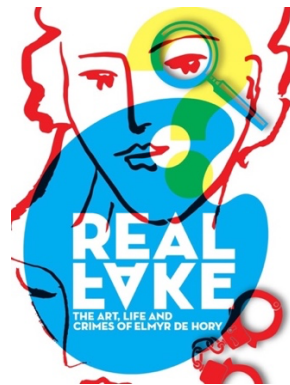


Fig. 1. Jeff Oppenheim, *Real Fake: The Art, Life, and Crimes of Elmyr de Hory*, 2017. [amazon.com]

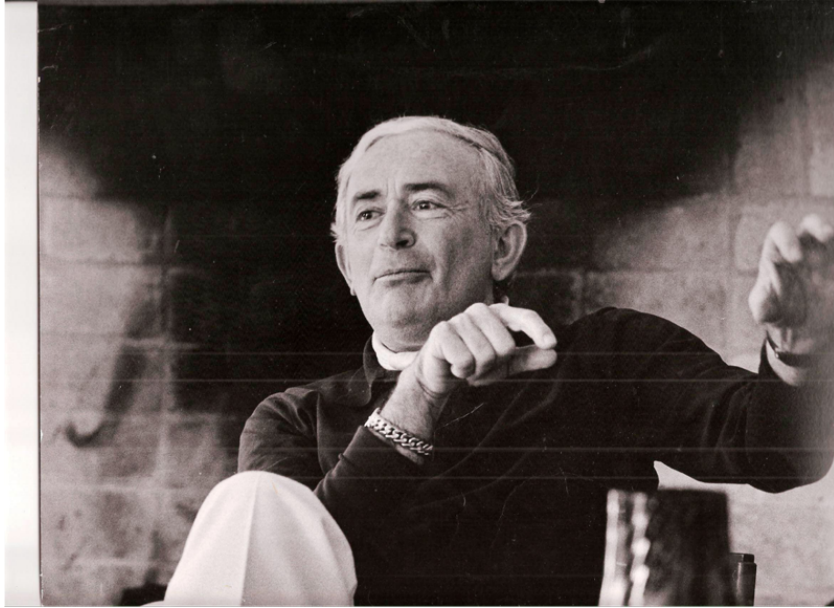


Fig. 2. Photograph of Elmyr de Hory by Mark Forgy. [archyde.com]

With the status of truth in filmmaking established, we can begin to analyze documentary films about art forgeries. *Real Fake: The Art, Life, and Crimes of Elmyr de Hory*, mainly describes the life of talented forger Elmyr de Hory (1906–76), who produced works in the style of artists without directly copying their other works (Oppenheim; figs. 1 and 2). Sometimes, de Hory would sign works with his own name, or both his own name and the name of the artist who inspired the work. This meant he was not entirely in it to dupe unsuspecting viewers, though he did produce many forgeries. An example is that de Hory created several works in the style of Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani (fig. 3). Here, the documentary supports the idea that real forgers do not usually recreate the works of the most famous artists, as is sometimes assumed in fictional stories. The film also emphasized that de Hory was not the main actor behind the plans to sell his works as authentic, but that Fernand Legros was the real conman of it all. Overall, the film describes a favorable image of de Hory as an earnest, talented, and glamorous artist who

became caught up in a forgery scheme, not a malicious forger who has contaminated the art world with fakes, as was in fact the case.



Fig. 3. Elmyr de Hory with a forged Modigliani [widewalls.com]



Fig. 4. Sam Cullman and Jennifer Grausman, *Art and Craft*, 2014. [artandcraftfilm.com]

Art and Craft explores the work of Mark Landis (1955–), a forger who donated his works to museums without the desire to make money (Cullman and Grausman; fig. 4). Landis sometimes donned disguises and used aliases—for example posing as a priest or a wealthy philanthropist—to gift his forgeries to small, unsuspecting museums (Cornwell; Reilly). It is estimated that over his career Landis attempted to donate more than one-hundred works to over 50 institutions in 20 different states (Reilly). The documentary tells the story of several players and victims involved with Landis' forgeries, especially Matthew Leininger who exposed Landis' donations of inauthentic works after discovering the scheme. The film tells an accurate story but is not representative of most cases of forgers. It concludes with the 2012 exhibition of Landis' works entitled *Faux Real: A Forger's Story* which took place at the Dorothy W. and C. Lawson Reed Jr. Gallery at the University of Cincinnati. Leininger was a co-curator of the exhibit, which displayed forty forgeries that Landis had donated to several museums. Seldom do forgers see their own work featured in exhibitions, so the film presents somewhat of an anomaly in this sense. The exhibition itself and the filmmaker's choice of Landis's successful story glorifies his actions and does not constitute a representative image of forgers.

One of the more popular art forgery films on Netflix is the recent *Made You Look: A True Story About Fake Art* (Avrich; fig. 5). It covers the Knoedler Gallery controversy when millions of dollars of artworks sold by the gallery were discovered to be inauthentic. This film is quite accurate because of its inclusion of interviews with several key players; although Glafira Rosales, the art dealer who sold the forged works, is not included (fig. 6). While the movie tells many sides of the story, there seems to be a bias against Ann Freedman, the former president of the gallery (fig. 7). Many of the interviewed people—victims of the scam, art experts, lawyers, and journalists—explain that they thought Freedman was either in on it, or too “stupid” to figure

it out (Avrich). There are clips of Freedman defending herself, but the editing implies that she is to blame because her claims are juxtaposed to clips of accusations from distrustful victims of the scheme. Interestingly, this film portrays two women, Freedman, and even more so Rosales, as main actors in the scandal, which counters Charney's claim that women are not involved in art forgeries (Charney 14). Charney concedes that women may be accomplices, but Rosales at least had more agency than that description implies. It is true, however, that the artist who physically created the forgeries was a man—Chinese immigrant Pei-Shen Qian—but Rosales was nevertheless heavily involved as the face of the scam. It is also interesting to note that Charney largely only presents white men as forgers, while the Knoedler case is illustrative of the racial diversity that may be present in art forgery schemes.



Fig. 5. Barry Avrich, *Made You Look: A True Story About Fake Art*, 2020. [imdb.com]



Fig. 6. Glafira Rosales and the Knoedler Gallery. [vanityfair.com]



Fig. 7. Ann Freedman, film still from *Made You Look: A True Story about Fake Art*. [ARTnews.com]

Availability on Netflix means that this film has the capability to reach broad audiences, so it is important for its message on forgeries to be truthful. The documentary depicts the state of forgers in real life relatively well through its inclusion of real interviews, yet leaves some

questions unanswered. Through its many interviews with victims who bought inauthentic art, the film implies that the monetary costs of the scandal were its worst consequence. The film also centers the damage that forgeries cause to the careers and reputations of those involved with the scam, knowingly or not, but I do not think there was enough discussion of the detriments that fakes and forgeries bring to the study of art and art history in a film that is so accessible. Though historical and academic harm are not what designates forgeries a crime, they are some of forgeries' gravest damages.

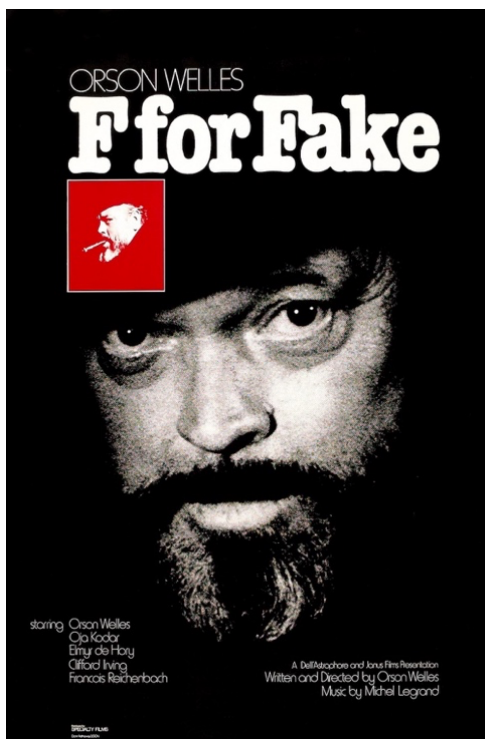


Fig. 8. Orson Welles, *F for Fake*, 1973. [*F for Fake*]

Another film on Elmyr de Hory film, *F for Fake*, walks the line between real and fake, much like actual works of art forgery do (Welles; fig. 8). Partially true and partially fictional, the film is difficult to classify. *F for Fake* opens with Orson Welles, director and narrator, presenting magic tricks to children, foreshadowing the mischievous tone of the film. The story about Elmyr de Hory is true and features footage of de Hory (which was recycled for the Oppenheim

documentary). Some of the other storylines, however, include actors and fictional narratives. For example, the end of the film features a completely fabricated story about a Picasso forgery—at the beginning of the film, Welles promised to tell the truth for an hour, and that time had passed.



Fig. 9. John Badham, *Incognito*, 1997. [imdb.com]

Fully fictional, *Incognito* tells the story of an art forger named Harry Donovan (Badham; fig. 9). The film is actually accurate in its depiction of the materials and methods Donovan uses to create his own “Rembrandt.” Additionally, the film incorporates some real aspects of other forgers’ stories; for example, there is a scene in which Donovan has to create a forgery in court, which likely takes inspiration from the real-life case of Han van Meegeren, who proved his identity as a forger by creating a fake work under police supervision (Stoilas; fig. 10). Most of the film is less credible, however. The film is over-dramatized and romanticized in the sense that there is a large focus on a love story, and the forger himself is sexualized, often appearing shirtless while he works (fig. 11). An especially dramatic storyline is the forger being framed for

murder by the villains. Interestingly, the forger is the protagonist of the story despite his participation in crimes against art.



Fig. 10. Han van Meegeren painting a “Vermeer,” October 1945. [theartnewspaper.com]



Figure 11. John Badham, film still from *Incognito*, 1997. [justwatch.com]



Fig. 12. Philip Martin, *The Forger*, 2014. [imdb.com]

Another feature film, *The Forger*, recounts a fictional story about an organized plot to steal a Monet and replace it with a forgery (Martin; fig. 12). This film very much inflates the role of organized crime which is usually not associated with forgery. In *The Forger*, a prison inmate who is an art forger is convinced to steal a Monet and replace it with a fake in exchange for help escaping prison. This film as well is overly dramatic, featuring double-crossing and murder, and it enforces the narrative that forgers often target major works by famous artists, which is almost never the case in real life.

The issue of fictional films about art forgery being inaccurate descriptions of the harms of forgeries may not turn out to be a serious problem, however, because many of these films are not very popular. They are, in fact, so unpopular that information about box office data is difficult to obtain, though there is evidence to suggest that *Incognito* made \$10 million at the box office and *The Forger* made \$16 million—both modest sums (Komparify; IMDb). It is safe to say that neither have reached a very wide audience. The films based on reality, however, are generally

more popular than their fictional counterparts. *Made You Look* is available on Netflix, which boasts 208 million subscribers around the world (Zeitchik), and *F for Fake* is a famous film—the last created by acclaimed director Orson Welles. As such, it seems that at least some documentaries about real forgers are fairly popular, which is promising because they present a more accurate picture of forgery than the fictional films.

As a whole, the films—documentary and fiction—do not condemn forgers to the lengths that viewers from art-historical backgrounds may desire in retribution for the aforementioned damages that forgers cause. On the contrary, forgers are often glorified and depicted as Robin Hood-like figures who beat the system. This contrast is most visible when comparing films and real life, but is also apparent between documentaries and fictional films, which feature the most romantic visions of forgers. Documentaries are closer to real life in their telling of “true” stories about forgers, although they also often romanticize and glamorize them, and do not fully explore the harms forgery causes.

This vagueness is likely because documentaries are nevertheless a form of entertainment, and it is therefore important for them to be dramatic and compelling. Exaggeration can be observed in the very stories selected to be explored in such films. Most forgers do not have as much artistic talent as Elmyr de Hory, they are not recognized in their own art exhibition like Mark Landis, and most instances of forgery do not result in big exciting busts and media coverage like what happened with the Knoedler Gallery. Even though these stories are based in real events, their selection over other stories paints an unrealistic picture of the real experience of forgers and forgeries because they are the most sensational cases. Most cases actually involve forgers who are not artistically gifted, people who are in it just for the money, and scammers who simply create provenance traps to fool experts. In its several forms and in its

romanticization and dramatization of forgers, film overlooks the crucial point of forgeries being harmful to not only the study of art and art history, but to our understanding of art itself. But film, in its flirtation with inauthentic “true” stories, deals with the very question we ask ourselves about fakes and forgeries in art: what is authentic?

Sources Cited

- “Art and Craft: What’s It Take to Catch a Fake?” Art and Craft Film.
<http://artandcraftfilm.com/see-film/> [accessed 16 May 2021].
- Aufderheide, Patricia. *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Avrich, Barry, dir. *Made You Look: A True Story About Fake Art*, 2020.
- Badham, John, dir. *Incognito*, 1997.
- Blumenberg, Richard M. “Documentary Films and the Problem of ‘Truth.’” *Journal of the University Film Association* 29.4 (1977): 19–22.
- Charney, Noah. *The Art of Forgery: The Minds, Motives and Methods of Master Forgers*. London: Phaidon, 2015.
- Cornwell, Lisa. “Faux Real: Museum Plays April Fools' Joke on Prolific Forger.” *The Times and Democrat* 1 April 2012. https://thetandd.com/lifestyles/magazine/faux-real-museum-plays-april-fools-joke-on-prolific-forger/article_e2ba32ea-7ab5-11e1-b517-0019bb2963f4.html [accessed 16 May 2021]
- Cullman, Sam and Jennifer Grausman, dir. *Art and Craft*, 2014.
- Durón, Maximiliano. “Knoedler Forgery Controversy, One of Art History’s Greatest Scandals, Is Explored in Provocative Documentary.” *ART News* 28 April 2020.
<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/knoedler-forgery-scandal-documentary-review-1202685153/> [accessed 16 May 2021].
- “F for Fake.” Wikimedia Commons.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:F_for_Fake_\(1973_poster\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:F_for_Fake_(1973_poster).jpg) [accessed 16 May 2021].

- Imamura, Taihei and Michael Baskett. "A Theory of Film Documentary." *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 22 (2010): 52–59.
- "Incognito (1997)." IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119365/> [accessed 16 May 2021].
- "Incognito (1997)." JustWatch. <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/incognito-1997> [accessed 16 May 2021].
- "Incognito." Komparify. <https://www.komparify.com/entertainment/movie/incognito> [accessed 9 May 2021].
- "Made You Look: A True Story About Fake Art (2020)." IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11994750/> [accessed 16 May 2021].
- Martin, Philip, dir. *The Forger*, 2014.
- Martinique, Elena. "Elmyr de Hory—The Story of the Most Famous Forger in Art History." *Wide Walls* 19 June 2019. <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/elmyr-de-hory-art-forger> [accessed 9 May 2021].
- Oppenheim, Jeff, dir. *Real Fake: The Art, Life, and Crimes of Elmyr de Hory*, 2017.
- "Real Fake: The Art Life and Crimes of Elmyr de Hory." Real Fake Film. <https://www.realfakefilm.com> [accessed May 16].
- Reilly, M. B. "UC Exhibit Focus: Museums' Vulnerability to an Artful Dodger who Donates Forgeries." *University of Cincinnati News*, 21 March 2012. <https://www.uc.edu/news/articles/legacy/enews/2012/03/uc-exhibit-focus--museums-vulnerability-to-an-artful-dodger-who-donates-forgeries.html> [accessed 16 May 2021].
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "*F for Fake*: Orson Welles's Purloined Letter." *Criterion* 21 October 2014. <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/364> [accessed 16 May 2021].
- Shnayerson, Michael. "What Does Glafira Rosales's Guilty Plea in the Knoedler-Gallery Forgery Case Mean for Ann Freedman and the Rest of the Players?" *Vanity Fair* 1 October 2013. <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/art/2013/10/glafira-rosales-guilty-plea-knoedler> [accessed 16 May 2021].
- Stoilas, Helen. "History's Greatest Forgers." *The Art Newspaper* 4 September 2020. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/history-s-greatest-forgers> [accessed 9 May 2021].
- "The Art Forger Who Duped the Nazis." *Archyde* 12 November 2020. <https://www.archyde.com/the-art-forger-who-duped-the-nazis/> [accessed 10 May 2021].

“The Forger (2014)” IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2376218/> [accessed 9 May 2021].

Tyler, Parker. “Documentary Technique in Film Fiction.” *American Quarterly* 1.2 (1949): 99–115.

Welles, Orson, dir. *F for Fake*, 1973.

Zeitchik, Steven. “Netflix Subscription Growth Has Slowed in 2021.” *Washington Post* 20 April 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/04/20/netflix-new-subscriber-numbers/> [accessed 16 May 2021].