

DERRIDA

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-By Maria Garcia

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In a medium which depends upon convention and preconceived notions--on mise-en-sc'ne and narrative--is it possible to portray any subject authentically? That's the question novice filmmaker Amy Ziering Kofman asked herself when she first embarked on a quest to capture Jacques Derrida on film. The famous French philosopher, the founder of Deconstruction, is obviously absorbed by the same question, and proves a difficult subject. Kofman knew the pitfalls--she is an academic and a former student of Derrida's. However, she is no match for the philosopher's extraordinary ability to unravel her every attempt at intimacy. Derrida is the sort of documentary you wish the Maysles Brothers had made.

Kofman followed the handsome, aging intellectual for five years, enlisting the help of documentary director Kirby Dick (*The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, 1997) to complete the film. Derrida nevertheless wins the battle against what he clearly believes to be the medium's artifice and the directors' chicanery. At one point, he tells Kofman (who conducts all the interviews) that if he answers her question by speaking for two hours, she will cut his response to a few minutes of film time, thereby constructing a package through which the audience will be deprived of his authentic response. Obviously, that's true. Derrida has devoted his life to the study of perception--his ideas changed the direction of Western philosophy--and he knows that the very act of appearing on film has the potential to alter the audience's perception of his work.

In an attempt to create some semblance of biography, Kofman and Dick devote entire sequences to readings from Derrida's books. For the most part, this narration proves far too enigmatic; philosophy was never meant to be read aloud. Following Derrida into the classroom and around his home, conducting impromptu as well as staged interviews, the filmmakers do a good job of portraying Derrida's lifestyle. However, the philosopher remains a fleeting subject. Pondering the very necessity for biography, Derrida tells a story about Heidegger. The German philosopher once said that if someone were to write a biography of Aristotle, it should read: He was born, he thought, and then he died. Generally, Derrida admits, he agrees with Heidegger on this point.

Derrida is fascinating for the very fact that its subject agreed to appear. Slowly but surely, the philosopher deconstructs his image so that his intellectual suzerainty is all that remains. While that may be precisely what he intended, it is clearly not what the filmmakers set out to do, but in that chasm between expectation and reality, Kofman and Dick illustrate, unwittingly, the concepts that lie at the very core of Deconstruction. If we come to the film, or to any experience, with preconceived ideas, then we will surely be denied the authentic experience. If we accept the unnatural as natural, according to Derrida--if we accept the film's image of him--then we have articulated the very necessity for Deconstruction.

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