

'Derrida's' subject remains enigmatic

[HOME EDITION]

Los Angeles Times - Los Angeles, Calif.

Author: Sorina Diaconescu

Date: Nov 8, 2002

Start Page: E.18

Section: Calendar; Part E; Calendar Desk

Text Word Count: 1092

Document Text

Common sense suggests that philosophy does not lend itself to cinematic spectacle, which may explain why few thinkers, dead or alive, have ever taken the leap to the silver screen -- until now. Opening this week at the Nuart for a limited engagement is "Derrida," a documentary in which two enterprising filmmakers, Amy Ziering Kofman and Kirby Dick, attempt to deconstruct the father of deconstructionism.

Derrida is certainly a rich subject. He is responsible for a hugely influential strand of postmodernist theory that proposed a rigorous critical examination -- "deconstruction," as he dubbed it -- of fundamental concepts embedded in Western philosophy.

Given to a lifelong exploration of the nature of language, writing and meaning, he has produced a massive oeuvre -- 45 books, countless articles and essays -- that has been alternately revered or derided as "babbling obfuscation." A brawl broke out in academe when Cambridge University considered him for an honorary doctorate in 1992. (The matter went to a vote with the dons of the institution, and Derrida won.) Controversial and influential, his work has been a well of inspiration for everybody from scientists puzzling out DNA maps to DJs, to fashion designers who artfully dismember old garments and sew them back together into newly configured wholes, to deconstructivist architects like Frank Gehry.

His writing is known for its extreme subtlety and sense of playfulness: He once published an experimental book, "Glas," consisting of two running columns -- one an analysis of Hegel's philosophy, the other a discussion of French thief and man of letters Jean Genet ("a work whose untranslatability must compare only to 'Finnegans Wake,' " a review noted).

So how did the two filmmakers go about capturing all that on screen, with no road map to boot? "It was a struggle because we did not want to make a standard biopic, and we did not want to make a primer," said Dick, who co-directed and co-edited the movie. "So we had to invent a [new] form."

"What really interested us was to really make an art film, a complicated film that draws people into the complexity of the thinking and gets them excited about that," added Kofman, co-director, producer and longtime Derrida buff. "Our model was a fugue: to have certain themes that are planted at the beginning and then complicate each other. Everything is working off of everything else, but not in a linear way."

The duo interviewed Derrida over the course of seven years. With a battery of digital cameras in tow, they followed him around his Paris home, joined him on transatlantic travels, attended many of his lecture engagements. The resulting 100-plus hours of footage were eventually edited down to 85 minutes into a black-and-white portrait of the thinker, startlingly unadorned save for a fluid, minimalist score by Riyuichi Sakamoto.

On the surface "Derrida" functions as a portrait of an influential intellectual force, something future generations will most likely treasure. (If only cameras had been around to record Plato, Descartes and Nietzsche for posterity!) They will see Derrida as a 72-year-old Frenchman with a leonine head of white hair, intense brown eyes and a forehead creased by four horizontal furrows. They will note that occasionally a pipe dangles from the corner of his mouth.

But the project, the filmmakers noted during a recent interview, was intended to be a meditation on biography, celebrity, the interaction between the public and the private sphere: all issues that figure prominently in Derrida's work.

Fortuitously, the very making of the documentary was already ripe with opportunities for deconstructionist analysis, and Derrida pounced on each and every one of them. He would preface every planned interview with lengthy remarks about the artificial character of the situation. "I want to acknowledge the surrounding technical conditions and not feign a naturalness which doesn't exist," he says in one scene.

"His inability to forget the camera wasn't put on," said Kofman. "The fun of the film is that we used it to our advantage." To circumvent Derrida's hyper-awareness, the filmmakers reached for improvisation. Rather than go through a battery of prepared questions, they decided to provoke him to a Socratic dialogue. The plan was to spring on him simple, generic questions, such as, "What do you have to say about love?" or "Tell us about Ego and Narcissus."

"He had no idea that the questions were going to be asked at all," said Dick. "So he had to either refuse to answer -- which is not really his style -- or formulate a thought, and an answer, on the spot."

Superimposed over snippets of talking heads calling Derrida "a thinker of lightning thoughts," authoritative voices from around the globe extolling his brilliance, are private moments -- vignettes of conjugal life, shots of Derrida buttering his breakfast toast, lunching in a Parisian brasserie, getting a haircut.

"This is always an issue in documentaries," said Dick. "There are these marginal moments that seem to have real significance, as if all of a sudden you understand the person -- but in fact, do you? It was a question we wanted to ask with this film." And if parts of the movie are challenging, they are meant to be that way, the filmmakers said. The hope is that the very complexity of the work will needle moviegoers unaccustomed to philosophical discourse into further exploration.

"If you don't get it all in the first pass, that's OK," said Dick. "This is something that either inspires you to go and read his work or to come back and see the film again. There's a certain thrill that Amy and I have in reading Derrida's, or really, any great thinker's work, and we want an audience to experience it too." Derrida, the filmmakers said, was always himself -- on camera as in person as on the printed page. "He held to all the precepts that he put forth in his writing," said Kofman. "At least professionally -- I don't really know him privately still -- he was always very careful and pedagogical, and you see that in the film." When an interviewer suggests parallels between his work and the television show "Seinfeld," Derrida remarks coolly, "Deconstruction the way I understand it does not produce any sitcoms." His advice for armchair philosophers who mine the TV lineup for deconstructionist nuggets? "Do your homework, and read."

Credit: Special to The Times

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.