

A documentary portrait of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. We see the dishevelled Derrida on his way out to the hairdressers, and later catch up with him charting the relationship between philosophy and biography in his near faultless English at an academic conference. Derrida is filmed addressing one of his seminars, and the film underlines the way Derrida's intellectual activity has resonated across disciplinary boundaries for four decades and produced more than 45 books.

Taking its cue from his reflections on the relationship between the material reality of a philosopher's life and his or her writing, the remainder of the film alternates between images of the public and private 'Derrida' during an eight-year period, from the breakfast table to the television studio, and from family gatherings to a string of lecture halls. Blending fragments of interviews with fly-on-the-wall material and extracts from his books on the soundtrack, we follow the energetic 72-year old on his punishing commute from France to the US, and to South Africa where he combines a guest lecture on the topic of 'forgiveness' with a visit to the prison cell in which Nelson Mandela was incarcerated.

Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman's film essay 'Derrida' is a lovingly crafted portrait of the philosopher Jacques Derrida as a globetrotting superstar. It is not an attempt to present systematically or interrogate the intricacies of Derridean philosophy. This is not meant as a criticism, and will doubtless come as a relief to many students who, over the years, have ended up slumped over copies of 'Margins of Philosophy' or 'Of Grammatology' with smoke coming out of their ears. The attraction of this film lies elsewhere, not least in its accessibility to all comers - the uninitiated alongside those well versed in Derridean thought - and the glimpses it offers into the home and work life of one of today's most significant philosophers.

The emphasis in the interviews is on the display of a brilliant analytical mind at work. The faintly embarrassing sense of 'Go on Jacques, show us some more thinking...' is most acute in the sequences where Derrida is tossed a more or less arbitrary topic and expected to improvise an elaborate on-camera response. When the strategy works, however, the results are superb: watching Derrida chase a thought or formulate and respond to his own question is often mesmerising, as when Dick (who made the acclaimed 'Sick' about the sado-masochist Bob Flanagan) asks him which philosopher he would choose as his mother (!), or when Ziering Kofman, one of Derrida's former pupils, asks what he would like to hear Heidegger, Hegel, or Kant discuss in a documentary similar to this one (answer: their sex lives). Equally compelling are the interviews with and about members of his family: the casual discussion about his love for his sister; the awe on brother René's face as he attempts to account for Jacques' talents; and Jacques and wife Marguerite's joint recollection of the day they first met on holiday in 1953.

The central structuring theme of the film is supplied by Derrida at the outset when he cites Heidegger's summary of the life of Aristotle: 'He was born. He thought. He died. And all the rest is pure anecdote.' The film gently interrogates this position, one in fact not wholly shared by Derrida. A seemingly random assortment of conventional biographical facts are read out: Derrida was expelled from school at the age of 15 because he was Jewish; he declined an offer from Marguerite Duras to play a part in one of her films; as an adolescent he dreamt of becoming a professional soccer player...Thereafter, rather than default to a chronological narrative and string of talking heads, Dick and Kofman dip in and out of their rushes to compose a vivid and highly engaging audiovisual portrait. Reminiscent at the times of the forms and strategies of the self-reflexive political cinema of 1970's, the film proceeds primarily through digression and collage, blend formats (Beta, DV), self-consciously foregrounds its status as artifice, and incorporates a running commentary by Derrida on the inherent falsity of 'cinéma vérité.'

The filmmakers' consistently respectful treatment of their subject leaves a faint 'Saint Jacques' aftertaste: the 'Derrida' who emerges from the film is charming, patient, sharp, funny, and humming with energy, and it comes as little surprise to learn that Derrida himself retained the right to final cut. But he makes wonderful company, and simply watching and listening to Derrida during the film is a real treat. Apart from the inspiring viewer to search out the nearest good bookshop, 'Derrida' reveals that its subject has the charismatic presence of a film star. It left me with a bizarre thought: if Derrida had been snapped up in the 1950s alongside Bardot and Belmondo by the New Wave directors, or if Duras had succeeded in persuading him to star in her film, the history of philosophy and French cinema might now both look very different.