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Movie Review | 'Derrida'

Peeling Apart Layers of Reality to Deconstruct a Philosopher

By ELVIS MITCHELL

errida," the adoring and adorable documentary on the philosopher Jacques Derrida by the filmmakers Kirby Dick ("Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist") and Amy Ziering Kofman, presents Mr. Derrida, the so-called father of deconstruction, as quick-witted and impish.

Scenes of Mr. Derrida watching himself on tape, talking about how he met his wife, Marguerite (he is bashful and thoughtful as he ruminates on this experience), will probably bring to mind the mirror-within-a-mirror Scritti Politti song "Jacques Derrida," with its querulous sense of propriety. But Mr. Dick and Ms. Kofman carefully layer folds of reality. (Later the subject is shown viewing film of himself watching the tape in which he watches the interview.)

These sequences are representative of Mr. Derrida's school of thought, investigating the mind of a philosopher as a working, living biography and font of emotional understanding. At such points, "Derrida" adds flesh to the icon, gently highlighting a quality attributable to many intellectuals: vanity. We see glimpses of this as Mr. Derrida prepares for his day — he takes as much care in his appearance as he does with his ideas. By applying definition to both sides of the man, the picture realizes a fullness that does not negate the subject.

This is not to say that "Derrida" is short on Mr. Derrida's weighty musings on life. Gleaning insights about him through his interactions with others may seem like a superficial way into his mind, although it is entirely possible that Mr. Dick and Ms. Kofman understand that all they can offer about Mr. Derrida is a drive-by, a blur of a view that will leave a number of things indistinct. They seem to recognize that this documentary can give only a slice of their perceptions of Mr. Derrida, and he reminds us that he becomes a different person when the camera is on.

Documentaries cannot really do other than supply a fragment of a momentary truth, and "Derrida" becomes a part of its deconstructionist subject's purview by observing its flaws as a forum and as a form.

Along the absorbing way to this conclusion, the film observes its subject through his less than dense and foolishly likable admission of his lack of knowledge about many things. He is a hopeless neophyte on love, but is also a delighted flirt who loves toying with people and ideas.

This movie certainly will fall short for those seeking loamy discourse about the ramifications of Mr. Derrida's work; to these people it will seem like, well, a pop-song bowdlerization of a master's oeuvre. The directors know that Mr. Derrida must be introduced to neophytes, who will not have a firm grasp of deconstruction until they see how it is woven into the fabric of the film. (When "Derrida" played at

the Sundance Film Festival, audiences thoroughly enjoyed it.)

Perhaps a certain level of serious expectation will exist among audiences because of Mr. Dick's previous documentary, "Sick," which provided an unstinting gaze at what a dying masochist endured. "Sick" and "Derrida" might suggest that Mr. Dick's primary interest is the dank side of life. Viewers might fail to note that "Sick" is as much about questioning perceptions of life, feeling and thought as "Derrida" is.

Upon consideration, it is evident that "Derrida" complements the way that the directors, and Jacques Derrida and Bob Flanagan, push for insights in whatever manner necessary. The search is what really matters.

DERRIDA

Directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman; in English and French, with English subtitles; director of photography, Kirsten Johnson; edited by Mr. Dick and Matt Clarke; music by Ryuichi Sakamoto; produced by Ms. Kofman; released by Zeitgeist Films. At the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Sixth Avenue, South Village. Running time: 85 minutes. This film is not rated.

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