

## Deconstructing Jacques Derrida

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**DERRIDA:** Documentary. Directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman. (Not rated. 85 minutes. In English and French with English subtitles. At the Opera Plaza, Shattuck in Berkeley and Rafael Film Center in San Rafael.)

He looks a bit like Ian Holm playing Bilbo Baggins in the first installment of "The Lord of the Rings." Frisky, playful, he has a full head of white hair and the sly, knowing smile of the intellectual who sees more than the rest of us but has the good manners to keep most of his judgments to himself.

He's Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher who formulated a school of thought called "deconstruction" -- an effort to challenge inherited and fixed assumptions. In "Derrida," a documentary by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, Derrida expounds on love, narcissism and the nature of truth, and evades personal questions at the same time he criticizes philosophers who separate biography from philosophy.

Kofman, a former student of Derrida's, started the film and was joined by Dick, a veteran filmmaker who last made "Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist." Their work, by its very nature, is dense and thoughtful and brimming with ideas that are too complex to be rapidly absorbed.

When the narrator quotes from Derrida's work, for example, the ideas are so layered that one wants to freeze the film and think for a minute before continuing. And yet, Derrida is a charming, frequently modest man who keeps things lively when he could simply be spouting profundities.

He takes nothing at face value, and constantly challenges his interviewer. Asked by Kofman to discuss the origins of deconstruction, he regards the camera, lights and wires and says, "Before responding to this question I want to make a preliminary remark on the completely artificial character of this situation."

What emerges, then, is a deconstruction of biographical documentaries that questions the reliability of perception and the doggedness of attitudes fixed by time. The film is nicely photographed by Kirsten Johnson and beautifully scored by Ryuichi Sakamoto ("The Last

Emperor").

Shot over five years, "Derrida" follows its subject to a lecture in Illinois, where gushing students surround him; to Derrida's home in France, where he lives with his wife of 45 years, Marguerite; to UC Irvine, where the Derrida Archive opened in 1995; to the University of Cape Town, South Africa, where he addresses the subject of forgiveness.

We also meet Derrida's brother, Rene, a simple man who marvels at his brother's accomplishments. "Each time he gives us one of his books, or we attend one of his conferences, we ask ourselves, 'How does he do it?' . . . Because we have brains as well, and we cannot come up with such things."

It was anti-Semitism, Derrida says, that forced him to look beneath the established order of things for the truth. Born in Algeria in 1930, he was 10 "when anti-Semitism became the official doctrine of the French government."

Jewish schoolchildren, professors and administrators were expelled. "No one told us why. One day the principal just said, 'Go home and your parents will explain.'" Even more painful than the expulsion was the persecution, the insults hurled by children in the streets. "This very 'rich' and painful experience naturally made me very sensitive to racism and anti-Semitism."

Most of the interviews are conducted by Kofman, who speaks French with a thick American accent, but the best question comes from Dick: "If you had a choice, what philosopher would you like to have been your mother?"

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Throughout, Derrida and the filmmakers return to Heidegger, the German thinker who believed that the anecdotes and details of a philosopher's life are irrelevant to his work. Derrida wrestles with that: He believes that it's untrue and yet finds it difficult to reveal personal matters.

Reading about the private lives of others is far preferable. "If you were to watch a documentary about a philosopher -- Heidegger, Kant or Hegel -- what would you like to see in it?" Kofman asks.

"Their sex lives," Derrida replies.

"Why?" Kofman wants to know.

"Because it's something they don't talk about."

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