

## Photobiographies: The 'Derrida' documentaries as film-philosophy

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Although the question of 'film as philosophy' has attracted much attention, most discussion has focused on narrative film with only occasional references to documentary.[1] Even less attention has been given to the small number of non-fictional films that focus specifically on philosophers and their work.[2] One such documentary is Kirby Dick's and Amy Kofman's *Derrida* (2002), a film that drew ambivalent responses from critics. Some acknowledged the film's attempts to explore the boundary between the biographical and the philosophical and to evoke the thought of 'deconstruction' via its reflexive staging of interviews, readings, and 'reality TV' vignettes. However, David Roden echoes many critics in lamenting the film's failure to engage in 'philosophical discussion and analysis', criticising it for being 'insufficiently philosophical'.[3] A related documentary, Egyptian poet Safaa Fathy's *D'ailleurs, Derrida (Derrida's Elsewhere, 1999)*, has been praised for both revealing its subject on screen – focusing attention on Derrida's Algerian background, his life in Paris, and teaching across the globe – while finding cinematic means to express key elements of his thinking. David Wills comments on the film's success in presenting the idea of an 'elsewhere' that is related to Derrida's notion of writing (*écriture*) as the displacement of speech and also praises the film for conveying cinematically the ethical ideas of confession/writing/autobiography, witnessing, testimony, and forgiveness.[4]

This intriguing reception of the two ‘Derrida’ documentaries raises an important question: what it means for a film depicting ‘the life of a philosopher’ to either succeed or fail as a work of ‘film-philosophy’ – one that communicates philosophical ideas via cinematic means. How does a philosophical documentary (one taking a living philosopher as its subject) achieve a cinematic articulation of his or her thought? In what follows I explore these questions by taking these two films (biographical documentaries that also attempt to articulate their subject’s philosophy) as my case studies. Rather than judging them according to traditional critical discourses I will consider how these documentaries ‘perform’ philosophy through film. These two films thereby highlight decisive issues in the ‘film as philosophy’ debate. The alleged ‘failure’ of *Derrida* as ‘insufficiently philosophical’ compared with the putative ‘success’ of *D’ailleurs, Derrida* in communicating philosophy (claims that I shall question) raise the question of how we might think through the film-philosophy relationship as a cinematic performance of thought. I suggest in conclusion that while both documentaries can be described as ‘performative’ (combining non-traditional documentary techniques, narrative elements, and reflexive presentational styles), Dick and Kofman’s *Derrida* enacts a deconstructive ‘performativity’ (presenting cinematic performances of philosophy while reflexively contesting these performances) that is closer in spirit to Derrida’s deconstructive mode of thought.

## Film and/as philosophy

Recent work on documentary has focused on questions of truth and representation, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, the possibility of objectivity versus the role of subjectivity, and the ethics of representation and of spectatorship.[5] Little attention has been given to documentaries that explore the relationship between film and philosophy, and the related question whether film can contribute to philosophical understanding.[6] The most interesting of these films attempt to stage a dialogue between filmmaker and thinker, or between image and idea. They not only communicate the living presence of the thinker but also seek to cinematically convey the sense of their thought. With a growing number of these films being made, some by highly celebrated filmmakers (such as Michel Gondry’s *Is the Man That is Tall Happy?* [2014], an imaginative animated

film-philosophical conversation with Noam Chomsky), it is worth giving them the philosophical attention they deserve. Hence my aim here to explore the manner in which these films might be understood as 'performing' philosophy on film.[7] I do not mean that they simply show philosophers engaging in philosophical discussion but rather that they respond to and communicate philosophical ideas in creative cinematic terms. These films are philosophical insofar as they enact or perform thinking via cinematic means and at the same time heighten our responsiveness to the world via aesthetic sense-making practices. They add important insights to the debate concerning 'film as philosophy' and thus deserve further attention from philosophers and film theorists alike.

### The *Derrida* documentary

The relationship between film and philosophy arises as a key issue as soon as one considers non-fictional films that take philosophers as their subject. Dick and Kofman's fascinating documentary *Derrida* (2002) is a case in point. This conventional title encrypts the film's most difficult question: what is the relationship between 'Derrida', signifying the archive of texts signed by the author Jacques Derrida; 'Derrida', signifying the manner and movement of thought for which the term 'deconstruction' has come to stand; and 'Derrida' as the proper name designating a particular individual, born in Algiers in 1930 and who died in 2004. *Derrida* address these related meanings at once, the name 'Derrida' serving to encompass them all as well as naming the enigmatic 'subject' whose distinctive face, voice, and gestures serve as the visual subject-matter of the film. Composed of a heterogeneous assemblage of interviews, seminar recordings, *vérité* footage, staged improvisations, and lyrical sequences framed by quotations from Derrida's texts, the film is also accompanied by an evocative score composed by Ryuichi Sakamoto. It joins a small but growing body of films that take as their subject living philosophers and which provide a rich opportunity to explore the relationship between philosophy and film. This 'microgenre' of non-fiction film can be described as 'performing' philosophy, showing instances of philosophical performance in a manner akin to 'performance art'.[8] They both depict philosophers 'performing' their ideas on camera but, more importantly, explore different ways of communicating or enacting these ideas via audiovisual means.[9]

Like many of these hybrid films (combining documentary with elements of portrait film, biopic, essay film, and fictional narrative) *Derrida* elicited mixed responses from critics concerning its 'philosophical' rather than cinematic status. This ambivalence is clearly evident in David Roden's review article in the journal *Film-Philosophy*. As remarked, Roden acknowledges the film's attempts to explore the boundary between the biographical and the philosophical – indeed, its ambitions to perform a visual deconstruction via its reflexive framings of the various interviews, quotations, and 'reality TV' vignettes composing the film. While acknowledging its sensitivity to the 'constructed or mediated nature of the image', Roden laments *Derrida's* failure to engage in 'philosophical discussion and analysis', hence dismisses the film as being 'insufficiently philosophical'.<sup>[10]</sup> This is a curious critique. The film is assumed to be presenting philosophical ideas and hence must find cinematic ways to articulate such ideas; but it also assumed that it is clear to what extent the documentary is obliged to contextualise, describe, or explain such ideas in philosophical terms. However, it is far from obvious what it means to deal with the relationship between film and philosophy or what it means for a film to deal with all of the issues – philosophical, biographical, and cinematic – clustered around the name 'Derrida'.

## Spectres of Derrida

Roden's critique raises the question of what it means for a documentary concerned with a philosopher to succeed or fail 'philosophically'. The assumption is that such a film should engage in 'philosophical discussion and analysis' via cinematic means, yet in a manner also recognisable as 'philosophy'. This is a contested issue; there are ongoing debates challenging the view that film can, let alone should, make something like philosophical 'arguments' by visual means.<sup>[11]</sup> Moreover, there is the question of how to make a film about a thinker who contested the notion of autobiography and radically questioned our culture's tendency to anchor the meaning of a work to an author's intentions, psychology, or biography.<sup>[12]</sup> What happens when a film is made about an author whose work does not readily yield to cinematic translation, yet whose persona presents a fascinating occasion for cinematic portraiture and visual archiving? The temptation to 'hero worship' is ever present.

Some of these questions are touched on, albeit obliquely, in Derrida's own work. His co-authored text with Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television* (2002), explores the deconstructive dimensions of televisual technology – a form of prosthetic mediation that creates the illusion of presence while collapsing time and distance via audiovisual representation. Using filmed interviews with Derrida and textual transcriptions of their discussions Stiegler and Derrida articulate (in a performative manner) the intermedial complexities that arise in the technologically-mediated translation between image and writing. Derrida has appeared on film before, notably in Ken McMullen's *Ghost Dance* (1983). As Derrida remarks in a well-known vignette from the film, cinema is 'an art of ghosts, a battle of phantoms'.<sup>[13]</sup> The fascination of cinematic presentation lies in the play between presence and absence, the image of an absent figure who possesses a ghostly presence, the impression of immediacy and virtual reality we experience that depends upon mechanical or digital recording, editing, and screening. The complexities multiply with a documentary presenting the figure of the philosopher, documenting the individual behind the texts while emphasising the constructed character of this persona and the enigmatic relationship between image, word, and idea within any such presentation.

As remarked above, the question whether film can screen philosophy has been much debated in the literature on the film-philosophy relationship; the consensus view is that the mere screening of a philosopher giving a lecture or discussing a topic would not count as film doing philosophy in the relevant sense.<sup>[14]</sup> Rather, a film recording of a philosopher engaging in philosophical discussion (an interview, a lecture or seminar, or the recitation of a philosophical text) would be a *representation* rather than a *performance* of philosophy on film. We readily find representations of philosophy in Dickand Kofman's *Derrida*: Derrida delivering a seminar on autobiography at Columbia University, being asked in an interview to explain deconstruction, lecturing students in South Africa on the nature of forgiveness. Such instances would not qualify as 'philosophical analysis and argument'. At best we could say they involve a recording of philosophical reflection, a reproduction of philosophical discourse; the film merely represents or reproduces, rather than enacts or performs, the thought articulated by the thinker.

However, as both Goodenough and Strathausen remark, *Derrida* is more than a conventional documentary;<sup>[15]</sup> it does not simply record the philosopher's response to interview-style questions but reflexively deconstructs

the very act of trying to film such a figure, drawing attention to the mediated, staged, and rehearsed character of the philosopher's speech and performance on screen (as I discuss at greater length below). Critics who claim that *Derrida* is insufficiently philosophical have overlooked this important aspect of the film; they have not attended to the reflexive devices and strategies the film adopts that contribute to reflecting or enacting a form of thought that both 'mirrors' what Derrida is saying but also puts these speech acts into question. It is the 'performative' nature of this task, I suggest, that marks the philosophical significance of the *Derrida* documentary. One should use the term 'philosophical' here with caution, given that Derrida is a philosopher whose work is dedicated to the deconstruction (the reversal/undermining and displacement/re-inscription) of key conceptual foundations within Western philosophy. This is why I approach *Derrida* as an attempt to 'perform philosophy' on film, to 'screen' philosophy by way of cinematic presentation and performance. From this point of view the film shows the impossibility of fully representing the life of a philosopher or the performance of philosophical thought in a manner recognisable as 'philosophy'. Does this make the film a failure? Paradoxically, we could say that its 'failure' as a work of cinema is also a mark of its success as a film-philosophical work. Its deconstructive aspect is not only found in the film's reflexive framing of Derrida's interviews, lectures, and texts, but in Derrida's own complex 'ghost dance' with the film, with his own image, and with the filmmakers – a case of deconstruction enacted via cinematic and philosophical performance.

The paradox of the film could be put as follows: to succeed as a philosophical documentary would be to fail to deconstruct this genre, for then the film would have demonstrated the sufficiency of this genre to address its subject, namely the life and thought of the philosopher Derrida. To fail as a philosophical documentary, by contrast, opens up the possibility of deconstructing this genre, of the film deconstructing itself as a philosophical documentary, which would be to question or problematise the very task that the film seeks to undertake – to show the manner in which a thinker's life and work might be represented on film. To succeed is to fail, whereas to fail is perhaps the only way the film can succeed in its task, even though what 'success' means here remains ambiguous. Let us consider some examples of the performative character of this encounter between filmmaker and subject, exploring how the film 'performs' a deconstructive thinking through its presentation of such an encounter.

## Improvisation

Throughout the near decade it took Dick and Kofman to make their film *Derrida* shows his reluctance, discomfort, and exasperation with the intrusions and demands involved in being filmed. The film does not shy away from depicting Derrida in moments of unguarded candour, expressing his irritation or impatience; he is often shot using long takes, framed uncomfortably, awkwardly, pursued and questioned by the filmmakers, and shown expressing doubt, revealing a complex philosopher-subject who can be charming, eloquent, and charismatic, as well as petulant, impatient, and frustrating. A constant refrain concerns 'difficulty': 'it is very difficult', Derrida remarks, whether in response to a question concerning how he met his wife Marguerite or being asked to improvise 'anything you like on love'. 'Amy, you can't do this!' Derrida objects. 'At least ask me a question!' Derrida's reluctantly improvised soliloquy on love, on loving someone for their absolute singularity ('the who') or for their attributes and qualities ('the what'), is discomfiting to watch. By holding Derrida in frame, refusing to cut, and including 'outtakes' where Derrida objects to what is being filmed, one has the impression of having intruded on an intimate space of conflict between filmmaker and subject; yet in the very awkwardness of the encounter between filmmaker and subject we also get closer to the truth – the ambiguous staging and scripting involved in 'spontaneously' performing philosophy on film.

There is an important sequence in the film that explicitly foregrounds this ambiguous relationship between spontaneity and scriptedness, between philosophical discourse and cinematic performance. It is an illuminating instance of what Stephen Mulhall has called 'film in the condition of philosophy':[16] film questioning itself as to its nature, its possibilities as a medium; or in this case, how a film might perform philosophy where philosophy is presented as a cinematic performance of thought. The sequence is framed by a fascinating passage on the topic of 'improvisation'. Here the film attempts to perform what it depicts – a performance, rather than mere recording, of philosophy. Against a jerky, blurry sequence of images, refusing us a clear view of the scene (Derrida on his couch watching television and opening his mail), Kofman, in voiceover, recites a text taken from an unpublished interview with Derrida dealing with improvisation:

[i]t's not easy to improvise; it's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or a microphone, one ventriloquises, or leaves another

er to speak in one's place, the schemas and languages that are already there ... All the names are already pre-programmed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise. One can't say whatever one wants; one is obliged, more or less, to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation; but always with the belief that it's impossible. And there were there is improvisation, I am not able to see myself; I am blind to myself. ... It's for others to see. The one who has improvised here, no, I won't ever see him.

As in other sequences, the film enacts the 'impossibility' of improvisation, its capture or conditioning by pre-existing forms of discourse, of history and culture; but also the necessity of acknowledging improvisation as an expression of spontaneity, creativity, and invention. This becomes more acute once we consider that improvisation is something that philosophy has traditionally repressed (argument is hardly improvised), whereas improvisation on film is always already mediated – framed, composed, edited, and manipulated. Moreover, the film forces Derrida to improvise – a forcing that Derrida both refuses and repeats, improvising despite himself; a coerced improvisation that strains against the spirit of the term. This demonstration of the 'impossibility' of improvisation that Derrida's texts describe is a striking instance of how the film's 'failure' is, paradoxically, a mark of its success. A perfectly executed instance of philosophical improvisation (carefully prepared and subtly edited) would hardly count as what Derrida claims improvisation to be; by contrast, the forced or 'failed' improvisation that the film captures gets much closer to the 'truth' of the paradoxical character of improvisation, particularly an improvisation of philosophical discourse as part of a documentary exploring the relationship between film and philosophy.

## Echo and Narcissus

The film then follows, or echoes, the sequence on improvisation with one on the myth of Echo and Narcissus. Here again is an instance of film 'in the condition of philosophy', or what I am calling film as *performing* philosophy: an attempt to enact or to actualise, via cinematic means, the kind of thinking that Derrida performs on camera. Such an approach involves an inter-medial dialogue, a performative interaction or 'ghost dance' between image and concept that attempts to elaborate and enact philosophical thinking through the affordances of the medium in conjunction with the discourse

of the philosopher. The myth of Echo and Narcissus thus serves as a suggestive metaphor for the complex interaction that unfolds between filmmaker and subject, or between film and philosophy as such.

Framed by a scene showing the camera crew in a room, Derrida appears standing aside a mirror, playing Narcissus to Kofman's Echo. He 'improvises' a response to her question concerning the myth in question, which Derrida reads as a parable on the relationship between image and voice, 'between light and speech, between the reflection and the mirror'. This question is prefigured earlier in the film when Derrida is asked about his response to a portrait presented to him by an artist-friend. 'It is uncanny, but I want to say, *j'accepte*, I accept. ... Little narcissist that I am!', he jokes, the camera framing him (not without irony) in intimate medium close-up, discussing icon painting. In the Echo and Narcissus sequence the camera pans from Derrida's reflection in the mirror to his 'original' image and back again; the philosopher and his double, the double being not only his image but the film itself as double or echo of the philosopher improvising a performance on film. This is a cinematic *and* philosophical performance meditating on the relationship between image and voice, light and speech, reflection and mirror; but it is also one in which the film reflects upon the philosopher's discourse, offering a cinematic response to his verbal presentation of ideas. Such a task is difficult and risky – difficult to do justice to the complexity of the philosophical discourse and risky in the sense of courting the charge of 'mere illustration' or obvious visual exemplification. The sequence echoes the myth – the film as Echo and the philosopher as Narcissus, the one doomed to repeat the phrases of the other, the other to contemplate his own reflection, his image, without being able to get beyond himself, to get beyond this cinematic mirror of self-presentation.

Narcissus remains forever trapped by his own reflection; the tears of Narcissus, Derrida remarks, are the tears of a solipsist; Narcissus (and perhaps also the philosopher reflecting on him) cries because he can only ever see himself (or his own image). As Derrida notes, this is precisely what is happening in this scene, in this film – Kofman posing questions, Derrida repeating answers, the camera panning between image and reflection, although here it is the philosopher who plays both Echo and Narcissus. Echo, in her loving cleverness, finds a way to catch Narcissus. She speaks by reciting his words – words that through this recitation become her own, a way of signing her love. The film too repeats Derrida's words, echoes his image, his improvisation, and in doing so makes them belong to the film – the image

becoming philosophical just as the philosopher's performance echoes his own image. To speak is not to see, Derrida observes; yet he does not see what his words mean, what his image shows, an image that he struggles to present and control, yet which escapes and overcomes him at the same time.

The film stages and reflects the scene of Echo and Narcissus as an instance of film performing philosophy – an invitation for philosophy to open itself to the performances of film and for film to adopt the performances of philosophy. Kofman and Derrida, *Derrida* and Derrida, are like quarrelling friends who talk past each other and yet cannot see each other in doing so. Derrida asks, how can two blind people love each other? How can Echo and Narcissus (or film and philosophy) love each other? The film's answer is evident in this awkward and difficult encounter; an ambiguous exchange between image and word, between filmmaker and philosopher, one that is also a cinematic performance of thought.

### *Derrida's Elsewhere (D'ailleurs, Derrida)*

A different approach to the film-philosophy relationship would be one where film 'subordinates' itself to philosophy or where the documentary image allows itself to be 'scripted' by the thinker. This intriguing interaction is what we observe in Safaa Fathy's *D'ailleurs, Derrida*, which, as remarked, was praised as succeeding (cinematically and philosophically) where Dick's and Kofman's *Derrida* was said to have 'failed'. Again it is difficult to define what is meant by evaluations of each film's relative success or failure in this respect, but at the very least they imply that the film succeeds (or fails) not only to convey the philosopher's life and persona but also to communicate, in cinematic terms, their thinking.

In his nuanced discussion of *D'ailleurs, Derrida*, David Wills draws the following conclusion about the film's achievements:

Safaa Fathy [...] makes a film that preserves on one level the coherence and cogency of Derrida's work, highlighting it against a vivid series of autobiographical backdrops, particularly the North African, and the triple elsewhere of Abrahamic cultures – Islamic, Jewish and Christian – that is Toledo. In this way she manages to double the biography of Derrida with her own Egyptian background. But she succeeds also in another more powerful doubling, what amounts to a double writing, that of a cinema of her own that, while following Derrida, both his body and the logic of his words, fills the screen with images, of desert, of ruins, and of the ocean, that appear as something like the aporetic hauntings of those words, some-

thing perhaps of their excised unconscious, something that functions within the perspective of a pardon and a healing.[17]

Wills alludes here to Fathy's success in preserving and articulating Derrida's philosophical work against the backdrop of his biographical (and autobiographical) history in Algeria, interspersed by the threefold cultural 'elsewhere' of Islamic, Jewish, and Christian culture (in Spain but also elsewhere). The filmmaker's own background shadows or 'doubles' Derrida's biographical ruminations like a kind of 'repressed' unconscious dimension of meaning, while the film itself, in 'following Derrida' (literally, metaphorically, and conceptually), offers a cinematic reflection or meditation on his work. The latter is figured in poetic images of desert landscapes, melancholy ruins, the volatile sea, spaces of personal memory, which provide a visual accompaniment to his discourse, another set of visual perspectives that displace the philosopher's words to a (cinematic) 'elsewhere'. This thoughtful comment on Fathy's film is supplemented by examples of the film's subordination of its own perspective to that of Derrida – both his autobiographical reflections and his discussion of philosophical ideas, an acknowledgement of the Other that Wills describes as echoing the (Derridian/Levinasian) notions of 'witnessing' and 'testimony':

Safaa Fathy has been particularly sensitive to that question [the question of 'speaking as a witness'] in making her film, and in making the choices of her film, reducing to a minimum her own interventions so as to produce an archival document that is neither biography, curriculum vitae, or even précis of an oeuvre, but first and foremost testimony.[18]

There is no doubt that Fathy's film has a poise and lyricism that deserves praise; it clearly establishes a relationship between filmmaker and subject that is revealing and intimate, an act of witnessing or of 'testimony' that is unobtrusive and respectful. Although sharing much with the other Derrida documentary, *D'ailleurs, Derrida* is a more conventional philosophical biography that is at pains to foreground Derrida the marginal thinker, his physical presence and mode of speaking, focusing on his Algerian heritage and familial memories, using visual imagery and temporal sequencing to evoke a sense of place, to probe the complex notion of identity, and to question the legacy of colonialism/post-colonialism in a European/North African context. Taking its lead from Derrida's expository discourse and accompanied by Derrida's own audiovisual commentary, it explores the ideas of confession, witnessing, place, autobiography, and the 'elsewhere' that haunts personal identity. The marrying of image and idea,

film/filmmaker and subject, is poetic and expressive – there are long takes of Derrida walking alone against a desolate Algerian landscape, accompanied by an atmospheric soundtrack; talking thoughtfully to camera against a picturesque ocean background, framed by cliffs, sky, and palm trees; a domestic sequence where Derrida takes the filmmaker (who remains absent, except for a couple of ‘accidental’ moments, from the frame) on a revealing tour of his personal library (which he describes as ‘sublime’ in the sense of nearing a limit of imagination and sense), even a touching sequence where Derrida shows us (and her), accompanied by his wife Marguerite, the improvised backyard graveyard he created for their pet cats. There are moments of subtle but candid self-reflection, as when Derrida, framed against a background of fish in a public aquarium, remarks that he feels the same as they do, sequestered behind glass, a captured creature on display for the scrutiny of others; or when the camera continues to roll after one of Derrida’s soliloquies, capturing him commenting and ‘directing’ the filmmaker, saying that he wants a certain sequence or comment to stay in the film, and so on.

In this respect *D’ailleurs, Derrida* is more engaging in its cinematic presentation of Derrida as its (philosophical and biographical) subject, but for this very reason is not as successful, I suggest, in screening or performing Derrida’s deconstructionist thought on film – it lacks those ambivalent moments of interruption or subversion that mark the (deconstructive) moments of tension or rupture in the encounter between philosopher and filmmaker. It avoids ambiguity or dissonance in presenting the relationship between the film and its philosophical subject, moments where the camera shifts from a relationship of recording, following, or witnessing, and enters instead a space of questioning or counterpoint, disputation or disagreement – moments of evocative encounter where a ‘cinematic thinking’ between film and philosophy can occur.[19]

As Wills notes, Fathy’s film must navigate between competing demands: those particular to any cinematic work (‘its cinematic quality’); those particular to the person of Derrida himself; and those specific to Derrida’s demanding form of thought.[20] As Wills observes, Fathy’s film responds to this threefold challenge by subordinating its ‘cinematic’ status to that of its philosophical subject and his mode of thinking. By allowing Derrida to ‘script the film’, so to speak, Fathy gives him the central role, the authoritative voice and presence that defines the film; but in anchoring the film firmly within the horizon and perspective of Derrida as biographical-

philosophical 'subject', her film subordinates the relationship between image and word, between spontaneity and scriptedness, between presentation and performance, that are essential to thinking through the film-philosophy relationship, particularly in a performative documentary on a deconstructive thinker.

It is not a matter of deciding whether one film is 'better' than the other, for these are films with different cinematic aims, aesthetic styles, and philosophical orientations. Nonetheless, the question of evaluation is still relevant; one film might be regarded as 'better' cinematically but not as successful 'philosophically', and vice-versa. Although *D'ailleurs Derrida* is a more accomplished cinematic presentation of Derrida it is less cinematically risk-taking, less performative as a work of film-philosophy. It eschews the possibility of questioning the thinker but also of commenting on, and elaborating cinematically, aspects of Derrida's thought. In this 'ghost dance' between film and philosophy the more ghost-like the filmmaker the more prominent the thinker; the more subtly poetic and expressive the image the more dominant and privileged the expression of ideas. For some this might be why *D'ailleurs, Derrida* succeeds 'philosophically' whereas *Derrida* fails. Its cinematic success, I would suggest, also marks a certain 'failure' as a performative work, one that enacts a conflictual dynamic between word and image that attempts to perform deconstructive thought in cinematic terms. Both films are marked by an acknowledgement, respect, even a love for Derrida, but one is more willing to risk or challenge this relationship, to contest the philosopher, to perform these gestures of (deconstructive) disruption – in short, to enact a cinematic thinking.

## Performance versus performativity

One way of summing up the difference between these two approaches is to invoke the distinction between *performance* and *performativity*: 'performance' as the conventional notion of dramatic enactment using all manner of physical, gestural, and expressive elements to solicit affective-emotional responses and to convey meaning; and 'performativity' as referring to a highly reflexive, reiterated enactment of varieties of meaning through action, gesture, speech, expression, and so on, that draws attention to its own constructed, conventional, or artefactual character. The most basic (Goffmanesque) definition of performance as encompassing any form of

physical action or expression that has the capacity to influence the response of others has, as is well known, been adapted and refined for the specific contexts and purposes of dramatic and cinematic performance. Although usually theorised with respect to fictional narrative film, documentary theorists such as Bill Nichols and Stella Bruzzi have cited 'performance' as a key mode of contemporary documentary filmmaking practice.[21] Indeed the notion of performance as an important element of documentary style has been explored within recent documentary theory.[22] We could extend this discussion of performance in documentary to include that of philosophers on screen; the specific manner in which philosophical documentaries both present their subjects, showing how a philosopher performs on screen, but also the way that the film presents this performance, framing or commenting on it in various ways. From this point of view Derrida's performance represents a key element in both films' attempts to articulate or even question the thinker's ideas. Both films could be described as documentaries that feature a 'performance' of philosophy – not only how Derrida communicates his thinking through speech, gesture, and expression, but also the manner in which the film frames or articulates this performance of thinking on screen.

To capture this dimension of performance it is useful to turn to the concept of 'performativity', one that is itself strongly associated with Derridian deconstruction. Popularised by Judith Butler's account of identity as based on the role of reiterative socially-coded performances of gendered comportment, the notion of performativity refers to the manner in which repeated self-reflexive performances of speech, action, and gesture can both convey meaning as well as draw attention to its conventional or constructed character.[23] Derrida and Stiegler both allude to this dimension of performativity as constitutive of audiovisual media, which convey a sense of presence, immediacy, and coherent meaning while being thoroughly mediated, constructed, and conventionalised.[24] Although both Derrida documentaries use and foreground the role of performance in their presentation of their subject, Dirk and Kofman's *Derrida* is more explicitly performative in the sense of enacting a *deconstructive* performativity – it not only highlights but also reflexively frames and subverts Derrida's verbal performance of thought before the camera in a manner that is cinematic rather than discursive. This offers us a lucid way of distinguishing between these two otherwise comparable philosophical documentaries. We have Fathy's respectful witnessing of Derrida as hybrid philosophical subject, an anoma-

lous thinker whose identity is always already marked by an 'elsewhere' – a cinematic gesture of acknowledgment that allows the philosopher's words and gestures to direct or 'script' the performance of the film. We also have Dirk and Kofman's *Derrida* as a case where performance and performativity interfere with one other in the deconstructive encounter, creating a more ambiguous, inconsistent presentation of Derrida – one that remains more 'true' to deconstructive thought in destabilising the coherence of the philosophical 'subject' it attempts to portray.

We can thus return to my original comments on the relative failure and success of these two films from the viewpoint of film-philosophy: Fathy's *D'ailleurs Derrida* succeeds in being more successful in capturing the performance of thinking through film but at the cost of downplaying the deconstructive performativity that this thought attempts to articulate. Dick and Kofman's *Derrida* 'fails' as a work of cinema in that it is more inconsistent and interruptive in its documentary engagement with its subject, in disrupting Derrida's performance; but in so doing it succeeds in articulating the deconstructive performativity of Derrida's thinking, finding specifically cinematic means of performing the operation of deconstructive thought. In this sense it succeeds as a work of film-philosophy despite its shortcomings from a strictly cinematic point of view. This is no less than one would expect from a documentary work dedicated to performing cinematic thinking.

## Author

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## Notes

- [1] See Constable 2009, Livingston 2009, Mulhall 2008, Read & Goodenough 2005, Wartenberg 2007, Sinnerbrink 2011. Wartenberg (2007, p. 18) mentions Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) as a possible candidate for film doing philosophy.
- [2] Goodenough discusses 'films about philosophy' (focusing on Rohmer's *Ma nuit chez Maud* [1969]), praising Dick's and Kofman's *Derrida* as 'rather more than a mere documentary' because it 'both depicts Derrida's public activities as a philosopher, his speeches and meetings, yet at the same time deconstructs them' (2005, p. 6). Strathausen (2009) also comments on *Derrida* in relation to Derrida's account of teletechnologies (see Derrida & Stiegler 2002). As he remarks of the film's pointed inclusion of the filmmaking apparatus within various sequences, 'these multi-level scenes of mediation put into play the constitutive impossibility of getting to the source or the essence of the subject "Derrida".' (Strathausen 2009, p. 140). Trine Riel (2015) examines the manner in which philosophers are depicted on screen in cameo, focusing on Brice Parain in Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1963) and Jacques Derrida in Ken McMullen's *Ghost Dance* (1983).
- [3] Roden 2003.
- [4] Wills 2004.
- [5] See Carroll 1997, Cooper 2006, Currie 1999, Nichols 2001, Plantinga 1996, Renov 2004, Saxton 2008, Winston 2000.
- [6] One recent exception is Riel 2015.
- [7] See Bowie (2015) for a discussion of how cultural meaning-making practices such as art can be understood as philosophically-significant performances that disclose and enhance our sense of meaning in the world. See also the edited collection by Cull Ó Maoilearca & Lagaay (2014) on Performance Philosophy.
- [8] Riel (2015, p. 93 ff.) discusses four ways in which philosophers appear in fictional and non-fictional films, including 'a known philosopher playing himself', as in the Derrida documentaries. Grindon 2007 discusses the poetics of the documentary interview format, an approach that has its roots in televisual culture.
- [9] Among these philosophical performance documentaries I would include the following: Ken McMullen's *Ghost Dance* (1982), Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein* (1993), Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001), David Barison and Daniel Ross's *The Ister* (2004), Astra Taylor's *Zizek!* (2005) and *Examined Life* (2008), Sophie Fiennes *The Pervert's Guide to the Cinema* (2006), Michel Gondry's *Is the Man Who is Tall Happy?* (2010), Tao Ruspoli's *Being in the World* (2010), and Safaa Fathy's *Derrida's Elsewhere* (1999).
- [10] Roden 2003.
- [11] See Livingston 2006; Mulhall 2008, pp. 129-155; Sinnerbrink 2011, pp. 120-135; Smuts 2009; Wartenberg 2007, pp. 15-31.
- [12] See Derrida, 'Circumfession' in Bennington & Derrida 1993.

- [13] This sequence, which begins with Pascale Ogier asking Derrida whether he believes in ghosts, can be viewed online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nmu3uwqzbl>
- [14] See Livingston 2006, p. 12; Sinnerbrink 2011, p. 125 ff.; Wartenberg 2007, pp. 15-31.
- [15] Goodenough 2005 and Strathausen 2009.
- [16] See Mulhall 2008, 3-11.
- [17] Wills 2004.
- [18] Ibid., Section 2.
- [19] I discuss the idea of cinematic thinking as a form of cinematic presentation that is resistant to philosophical conceptualisation or paraphrase in Sinnerbrink 2011, pp. 137-139.
- [20] Wills 2004, Section 1.
- [21] See Bruzzi 2000 and Nichols 1991, 2001.
- [22] See Bruzzi 2000, Grindon 2007, Marquis 2013, Nichols 2001, and Waugh 1990. Bruzzi criticises Nichols for conflating performance with the deconstructive notion of performativity, referring to Judith Butler's work, claiming that this is what Nichols *should* have used to describe the 'performative' mode of documentary presentation (2000, p. 154).
- [23] See Butler 1990. Butler draws on Derrida's deconstructive critique (1988) of Searle's account of J. L. Austin's pragmatic theory of performative speech acts, arguing that the fluidity of context and necessity of iterability (citational repeatability) make Searle's attempts to formalise definable rules governing the performance of speech acts fundamentally untenable.
- [24] See Derrida & Stiegler 2002.