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confusing times."**

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**"Ideas beam out from
Astra Taylor's engaging
new philoso-doc...
the viewer basks in the
intelligence on-screen
and, occasionally,
soaks up the rays."**

**—J. Hoberman,
THE VILLAGE VOICE**

*from the
director of 'Zizek'*

EXAMINED LIFE

PHILOSOPHY IS IN THE STREETS

A FILM BY ASTRA TAYLOR

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The New York Times

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2009

Thinkers in Transit, Philosophy in Motion

WHEN the documentary filmmaker Astra Taylor speaks of a cinema of ideas, she means it more literally than most. Her first film, “Zizek!” (2005) accompanied the Slovene philosopher Slavoj Zizek on a lecture tour. Her second, “Examined Life,”

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opening Wednesday at the IFC Center, recruits a wide array of thinkers and theorists to muse out loud about the role of philosophy in our lives, playing off the Socratic observation that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

After “Zizek!” Ms. Taylor, 29, wanted to tackle philosophy again. The producer Ron Mann, a veteran documentarian himself, encouraged her to make an ensemble movie with an all-star cast of philosophers, a prospect that was both enticing and somewhat alarming. If people found talking-head films uncinematic, what would they make of a talking-egghead film?

“Secretly I thought it was going to be disastrous,” Ms. Taylor said in a recent interview. “I might as well do an audio interview.”

Then it occurred to her that her talking heads should walk and talk. She had just read “Wanderlust,” a discursive study of the history of walking by Rebecca Solnit, and was reminded of the figure of the peripatetic philosopher, from Aristotle (who paced the Lyceum while teaching) to Kierkegaard (a proponent of thinking while walking, which he frequently did in the Copenhagen streets) to Walter Benjamin (the embodiment of the Paris flâneur). She realized that putting her subjects in motion would elicit a different kind of interview than if they were seated behind their desks in offices. This conceit became a guiding principle for a film that would attempt to take philosophy out of the ivory tower and affirm its place in the flux of everyday life.

“My intention was to show the material conditions out of which ideas emerge,” Ms. Taylor said. “People often think of philosophy as cold, analytic, abstract, disconnected from the real world, and I really want to say that’s not the case.”

A few of the philosophers she approached were personal heroes of a sort. She first heard of Peter Singer and his de facto manifesto for the animal rights movement, “Animal Liberation,” as a 12-year-old obsessed with vegetarianism. Having grown up with what she called “an earth-motherly sense of feminism,” she discovered a countervailing voice in Judith Butler, the gender theorist and post-structural feminist. And because her sister Sunaura Taylor, a painter who appears in the film, was born with arthrogryposis, a disorder of the joints, she took an interest in the work of the



In “Examined Life,” the Princeton professor Cornel West, above, speaks to the film’s director, Astra Taylor from the back seat of a car in New York rush hour.

law and ethics scholar Martha Nussbaum, who has written about disability in terms of the social contract.

Once Ms. Taylor settled on her list of subjects — “I didn’t have to strong-arm anyone,” she said — she looked for locations that would spark connections both for the interviewees and for viewers. The reliably excitable and contrarian Mr. Zizek questions received notions of ecology and the environment as he rummages through heaps of garbage in a London dump. Mr. Singer reflects on the morality of affluence while walking past the luxury storefronts of Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. The Princeton philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses cosmopolitanism within the glassy confines of Toronto’s international airport. (He had just stepped off a plane, Ms. Taylor said.)

Other settings are less pointed but take on an unexpected relevance or lend an intriguing tension. The deconstructionist critic Avital Ronell strolls through Tompkins Square Park in the East Village, provoking looks from bystanders as she theorizes on “the wound of nonmeaning.” Michael Hardt, the co-author (with Antonio Negri) of the new-world-order treatise “Empire,” rows a boat in Central Park while wondering what a present-day revolution might look like. Symbols of aristocratic wealth are all around, he notes, but the idyllic location also reinforces the revolutionary idea of an everyday utopia.

The voluble intellectual celebrity Cornel West, who opens and closes the film, is shot in the back seat of Ms. Taylor’s old Volvo as she

drives through rush-hour Manhattan. It was partly a practical decision — he had an hour to spare and a lecture to deliver, so she offered to drop him off — but also a logical one, she said, “because he’s so accelerated in his thinking.”

While each subject is given about 10 minutes of screen time, Ms. Taylor engaged in hours of conversations with most of them (and has edited her transcripts for a book to be published by the New Press). Since she wanted to appeal not only to what she called “the inside-philosophy crowd,” she asked them to minimize the jargon. “All my subjects have made an effort to inject ideas into the public sphere,” she said. “They aren’t trying to isolate themselves.”

Her own passion for ideas, she said, comes less from higher education — even though she immersed herself in critical theory and Continental philosophy at the University of Georgia and the New School — than from her home-schooled upbringing in Athens, Ga. “In our household the world was our classroom,” she said.

With “Examined Life” Ms. Taylor set out to make a pedagogical documentary that is less a lecture than a call to cerebral action — a film that, as she put it, “creates a space for thought.” Still, the end result differs from her initial conception in one significant respect. “I thought it was going to be this sort of slow-paced philosophical ramble, but it actually really moves along,” she said. “It’s because they’re philosophers. These are intense people with intense ideas.”