

What if someone came along who **CHANGED** not the way you **THINK** about everything, but **EVERYTHING** about the way you think?
everything.



DERRIDA



A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE



DERRIDA

DERRIDA is a playful, personal and theoretical portrait of the internationally renowned French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. Best known for originating the movement known as “deconstruction,” Derrida's radical rethinking of the precepts on which Western metaphysics are founded has deeply influenced the studies of literature, philosophy, ethics, architecture and law, indelibly marking the intellectual landscape of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Produced with Derrida's full cooperation and consent, the film is the most ambitious cinematic project ever undertaken with a world-class philosopher. Initiated by Amy Ziering Kofman, who studied with Derrida at Yale in the 1980s, and co-directed by Kirby Dick and Ziering Kofman, Derrida is neither a conventional film biography nor a primer on his thinking. Rather, in the spirit of Derrida's own writing, the film investigates the concept of biography itself and explores the nature and limitations of the cinematic form in addressing philosophical thought.

Braiding together rare *vérité* footage of Derrida in his private life with his reflections on deconstruction, violence, the structure of love, the history of philosophy and the death of his mother, the film raises questions about the relationship between the public and the private, the personal and the theoretical, the biographical and the philosophical. It is a rich and moving meditation on both Derrida himself and the themes that haunt and inspire his work.

DERRIDA was directed by Kirby Dick (*Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan Supermasochist*, *Chain Camera*) and Amy Ziering Kofman (Producer, *Taylor's Campaign*), with an original score by Oscar winning composer, Ryuichi Sakamoto (*The Last Emperor*, *Gohatto*, *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*).



PRODUCTION NOTES

Chance favored the making of DERRIDA, from the moment Ziering Kofman happened across the works of Jacques Derrida as a teenager. “His work spoke to me with such immediacy,” she recalls. Indeed, when Kofman entered Yale in 1984, it was primarily to study with Derrida. “We had a nodding acquaintance based on those classroom interactions, but we never corresponded after that. I wasn't sure he'd remember me when I approached him after a lecture he gave in Los Angeles in the mid-1990s and re-introduced myself. He was very gracious, however, and it was then that I proposed making this documentary.”

Derrida was open to the proposal, but cautioned Ziering Kofman that others before her had tried, without success: His areas of excellence don't exactly lend themselves to cinematic documentation. Ziering Kofman was nevertheless determined, and here again a bit of propitious good fortune intervened. A grant proposal she had submitted for the project came through at the same moment she received Derrida's formal approval, in writing. (“I had to assume he was giving his approval,” she now laughs. “His handwriting isn't that easy to read.”) A few weeks later, Derrida was surprised but intrigued to find a film crew at his doorstep, there as if by return mail.

Production continued, in piecemeal fashion, over the course of several years. “The next grant didn't come quite as easily, and by then I was also pregnant,” Ziering Kofman recalls. These and other practical difficulties led her to consider seeking a co-director. “I'm an academic, and my approach to filmmaking is primarily theoretical,” she readily admits. But here again, chance serendipitously intervened: “A friend took me to a rough cut of Kirby Dick's *Sick* right before it went to Sundance in 1997, and I was thrilled by Kirby's refusal to impose value judgements on the sexuality portrayed in that film. He wasn't stereotyping; he was open to respecting the Otherness it portrayed. In my view, he was instinctively holding to a Derridean precept, a system of opposites in which neither dominance nor submission is privileged.”

She invited Dick to come on board DERRIDA, and he in turn was just as enthused by what she had already done. “Looking at Amy's material, I was struck by the intimacy of it.” Like Kofman, Dick had come to French theory on his own when younger, and has a

passion for it. He “dove in” and began editing, filling out the existing material with fresh footage—Derrida on a visit to University of California Irvine, his first visit to South Africa (where he addressed the theme of forgiveness)—before the production finally returned to Paris to cover his life there. “The central theme of the film has a strong appeal for me: ‘How do you reconcile a thinker's thought with their life?’ To entirely dismiss the relationship, as Heidegger does, is problematic—as Derrida himself repeatedly points out. The challenge, in editing these materials, was to let Derrida's life and thought resonate and interact without either being used to simply 'explain' the other.”

Including Derrida's playful shows of resistance, dodging this or that question, or repeatedly pausing to point out to viewers the artificiality of this or that circumstance in the interview, were essential in Dick's view: “These personal and playful asides are an important part of his thinking, and are found throughout his writing. Emphasizing them goes a long way toward countering the prejudice that Derrida is being difficult just to be difficult.”

Ziering Kofman recalls that, as they neared the end of production, and showed him a rough cut, it was Derrida himself who urged the finishing touch, one Dick had already been working with: To include extensive excerpts from Derrida's published works. “We can be so resistant to theory, especially in America, and especially in film” says Dick. “When wrestling the film into its final shape there was a constant risk that we could fail, but I like that. *Sick* presented a similar challenge. To be truthful, we had to push very close to an extreme edge in our presentation of S/M sexuality—but those extreme moments make the experience of watching the film startlingly cinematic. Likewise, in *DERRIDA*, the “startling” moments are the readings of his work. The struggle to comprehend them becomes an adventure in itself, one from which you emerge larger. Amy and I had to proceed in the faith that thought at Derrida's level could somehow translate into a richly cinematic experience.”

Adds Ziering Kofman: “Another attraction is the simple pleasure of having a historic cinematic record of such a person. Wouldn't it be interesting to be able to watch footage today of Plato or Nietzsche during their lifetime? A hundred years from now, it will be just as remarkable and important to have a cinematic record of Derrida.”



DECONSTRUCTION—A SUMMARY

Although Jacques Derrida may be justly described as a philosopher, his brainchild, deconstruction, might best be defined as a stance, a challenge to philosophy. Reality—as we have been taught since Plato—is understood by asking “What is...?” And pursuing a line of inquiry whose end result is a stable realization, such as: “I think, therefore I am.” Other philosophers might counter this idea, approve it, or modify it, but underneath their arguments lies a shared assumption that what is true can be decisively revealed.

Derrida seeks to destabilize these inherited assumptions. We think, therefore we question, he counters. Even Plato's own thinking contains such challenges to its own theses. As centered and orderly as Plato's arguments may appear, there is an element of no less revealing conflict built in. Locating that shadow is where deconstruction finds its meaning.

For example: Plato, in his parable of Phaedrus, denounces the written word as being inferior to words which are spoken by an actual human being. (This is a principle which to this day upholds much of our civilization. In a court of law, written evidence is easily outweighed by testimony that is spoken under oath.) Yet Plato advances this time-honored idea in writing, observes Derrida: a contradiction that complicates the decisiveness of Plato's assertion about the primacy of the spoken word.

Similarly, Derrida takes issue with the way in which much of metaphysical thought is founded on dynamic oppositions of good and evil, interior and exterior, essence and appearance, true and false, life and death.

Derrida views western culture as being pervaded, perhaps inescapably, by metaphysics, by searches for truth whose point of origin is singular and lies outside the realm of the empirically knowable. Deconstruction may not provide the escape route—Derrida asserts that no critique can ever completely escape what it is criticizing—but a necessary liberation takes root when we resist thinking reality's essence is founded in some truth exterior to its own system.

Applied to literature, theology and politics, Derrida's method is a magnet for controversy. Many assume that by so thoroughly attacking and shaking our culture's philosophical foundations, we are destroying them. Derrida has often been accused of moral relativism for taking the stance that he has. If knowledge is not always certain, so goes the conventional wisdom, how can one engage in deconstruction yet continue to function as a moral and ethical being?

The answer for Derrida is built into the question. Deconstruction resists the tyranny of the easy answer. One is all the more ethically and morally responsible because one is in charge of making a decision and being accountable to that decision. No truth may lie outside one's system for truth making, but that doesn't mean that one can't make moral and ethical decisions—one just must take responsibility for those decisions and not believe them to be preordained or given by a higher power.

As such, deconstruction resists tyranny. Therein arises its moral value, its relevance to the century from which we've just emerged, and its use for the one now emerging.



JACQUES DERRIDA – BIOGRAPHY

Although Heidegger wisely argued that a philosopher's personal life is irrelevant to his philosophy, Jacques Derrida himself wonders about the significance one particular trauma from his own childhood had in the development of his own critical thinking.

Born in 1930 to a Sephardic Jewish family in what was then French Algeria, Derrida was expelled from public school at age 10 as part of an anti-Semitic purge waged by the Vichy authorities in thrall to the Nazis. This event—his small share in a worldwide catastrophe—left him forever skeptical of educators, of intellectual prejudice, of any set of prefabricated “givens” (especially political attitudes), which too often enter our lives and shape our thinking without a vigorous examination.

He moved to Paris in his teens and from 1952 to 1956 studied philosophy with the Marx and Hegel scholar, Jean Hyppolite, at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. It was also during

this period that he met and married his wife, the psychoanalyst Marguerite Derrida. In 1957, he began a doctoral thesis in philosophy (the subject was to be Husserl's phenomenology)—only to abandon it for a set of reasons which now sound like a manifesto of deconstruction (his future philosophical brainchild): “Is it possible to write about philosophical writing within the limits of an academic thesis?” he asked. “Wouldn't it have to perform what it argued, and therefore be written differently? What if the examiners insist on the standard philosophical protocols—the ones I want to question?”

The brilliance and magnetism of such resistance won Derrida many honors and champions within the world of academe. He was awarded a scholarship to Harvard in 1956, and the Prix Cavailles in 1962. He has spent much of his life teaching in both Europe and America, at La Sorbonne, L'Ecole Normale Supérieure, L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Johns Hopkins University, Yale, The New School, NYU, UC Irvine. “Deconstruction” was hatched in 1967 with his simultaneous publication of three major works—“Speech and Phenomena,” “Writing and Difference,” and “Of Grammatology.” Since this initial biblio-blitz, Derrida has since gone on to publish over 45 books, translated into over 22 languages worldwide.

Deconstruction confronts the assumptions which underlie everyone's thinking. So much of western philosophy is founded on metaphysics—the search for a Holy Grail of “unity,” of an essence that will explain everything—that Derrida's unyielding challenge to this system of comforts has made him and his work twin lightning-rods for controversy. In 1992, a huge row erupted at the University of Cambridge when Derrida was awarded an honorary degree: “Deconstruction is a theory which lends itself to babbling obfuscation,” complained one angry don. But such protests were overwhelmed handily when the matter was put to a vote—for the brute fact is that Derrida has ineradicably altered the landscape of thought in the 20th and 21st centuries. He's organized a set of ever-evolving tools by means of which we may think about thinking—a life-giving exploration with positive, energizing consequences in fields as diverse as art, literature, music, the law, ethics, politics, architecture, even fashion.

As such, Derrida is personally committed to furthering social justice throughout the world. Over the years he has participated in activist interventions in France, Czechoslovakia, South Africa and the United States. Quite apart from corroding lucid moral values—as its detractors fear, and often claim it does—the challenges and inquiries of deconstruction, as Derrida employs them, are vital to both the creation and nurture of a conscience.

KIRBY DICK

Kirby Dick is an award-winning filmmaker who directed the internationally acclaimed *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, which received the Special Jury Prize at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival and was released theatrically by Lion's Gate Films. Dick's other films include *Private Practices: The Story of a Sex Surrogate*, awarded Best Documentary at the USA Film Festival, and *Chain Camera*, which premiered at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival. Dick is currently directing the pilot for a new HBO documentary series based on *Chain Camera*.

AMY ZIERING KOFMAN

Derrida marks Amy Ziering Kofman's directing debut. She most recently produced the critically acclaimed feature documentary *Taylor's Campaign*, which followed the race for a seat on the Santa Monica City Council by one of its homeless residents.

RYUICHI SAKAMOTO

Ryuichi Sakamoto is a world class composer whose score for Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* won him an Oscar, a Grammy, a Golden Globe and the New York, Los Angeles and British Film Critics Association awards for best original soundtrack. Sakamoto has worked with numerous other noted directors, including Nagisa Oshima (*Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, *Gohatto* aka *Taboo*), Oliver Stone (*Wild Palms*), Pedro Almodovar (*High Heels*), Brian De Palma (*Snake Eyes*), and for the BBC, John Maybury's *Love is the Devil*. Sakamoto has also collaborated artistically with David Bowie, David Byrne, Iggy Pop and Youssou N'dour, as well as writers William Burroughs and William Gibson, and the performance artist Robert Wilson. Most recently, he completed his second film with De Palma, composing the score for the upcoming release *Femme Fatale*.

DERRIDA

DIRECTORS Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman

COMPOSER Ryuichi Sakamoto

PRODUCER Amy Ziering Kofman

EDITORS Kirby Dick and Matt Clarke

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER Gil Kofman

CAMERA Kirsten Johnson

SOUND Mark Z. Danielewski Pascal Depres Benoit Hillebrandt

ADDITIONAL CAMERA Richard Atkinson Baird Bryant
Christine Burrill Herve Cohen Mark Z. Danielewski Gil Kofman
Arturo Smith Geza Sinkovics Chris Tetens

ADDITIONAL SOUND Alan Barker Kip Gynn Yuri Racin Chris Scarfile

ADDITIONAL EDITING Gil Kofman

FIRST ASSISTANT EDITOR Brian Jonason

ASSISTANT EDITORS Mark Z. Danielewski Adam Finberg
Annette Aryanpour Damien Caldwell

EDITING CONSULTANT Tristan Brighty

SUBTITLES Amy Ziering Kofman

POST-PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR Brian Jonason

MUSIC MIXED BY Ryuichi Sakamoto and Fernando Aponte

MUSIC RECORDED AT Kab Studios, NYC

MUSIC RECORDED BY Fernando Aponte

RE-RECORDING MIXER Mark Linden

TITLES Mike Kahne

USA | 2002

Running time: 85 mins

Aspect Ratio: 1.85:1

Sound: Dolby S/R



A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

247 Centre Street, 2nd Floor

New York, NY 10013

(212) 274-1989 • FAX (212) 274-1644

mail@zeitgeistfilms.com • www.zeitgeistfilms.com