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A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

EXAMINED LIFE

a film by Astra Taylor

Examined Life pulls philosophy out of academic journals and classrooms, and puts it back on the streets as filmmaker Astra Taylor (*Zizek!*) accompanies some of today's most influential thinkers on a series of unique excursions through places and spaces that hold particular resonance for them and their ideas.

Peter Singer's thoughts on the ethics of consumption are amplified against the backdrop of Fifth Avenue's posh boutiques. Sifting through a London garbage dump Slavoj Zizek turns the common view of ecology upside down. Michael Hardt ponders the nature of revolution while surrounded by symbols of wealth and leisure. Judith Butler and Sunaura Taylor stroll through San Francisco's Mission District questioning our culture's fixation and individualism. And while driving through Manhattan, Cornel West—perhaps America's best-known public intellectual—compares philosophy to jazz and blues, reminding us how intense and invigorating a life of the mind can be. Offering privileged moments with great thinkers from fields ranging from moral philosophy to cultural theory, *Examined Life* reveals philosophy's power to transform the way we see the world around us and imagine our place in it.

Featuring Cornel West, Avital Ronell, Peter Singer, Kwarne Anthony Appiah, Martha Nussbaum, Michael Hardt, Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler and Sunaura Taylor.

THE PHILOSOPHERS

Kwame Anthony Appiah

was born in London (where his Ghanaian father was a law student) but moved as an infant to Ghana, where he grew up. A philosopher, cultural theorist, and novelist, he is Laurance S. Rockefeller Professor of Philosophy at the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University and the author of many books, including *The Ethics of Identity*, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, *Thinking it Through*, and *Experiments in Ethics*.

Judith Butler

Maxine Elliot Professor in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, has contributed to the fields of feminism, queer theory, political philosophy, and ethics. Published in 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* has sold well over 100,000 copies internationally, becoming one of the most cited contemporary philosophical texts. Her other books include *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*; *Precarious Life: Powers of Mourning and Violence*; and *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

Michael Hardt

is the co-author, with Antonio Negri, of *Empire*—an international bestseller dubbed “the *Das Kapital* of the anti-corporate movement” by Naomi Klein—as well as its sequel, *Multitude*. He is a professor of literature at Duke University.

Martha Nussbaum

Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, holds appointments in the Philosophy Department, Law School, and Divinity School at the University of Chicago and is a board member of the university's human rights program. She holds thirty-two honorary degrees from universities around the world. Her research and writing covers a broad range of subjects: philosophy and literature, ancient philosophy, liberal education, social and political issues, and philosophy of law. Her many books include *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*; *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*; and *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality*.

Avital Ronell

literary critic, feminist/deconstructionist, and philosopher—received her PhD from Princeton University in 1979 before continuing her studies with Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous in Paris. University Professor at New York University and Jacques Derrida Chair

of Philosophy and Media at the European Graduate School in Switzerland, she is the author of *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech; The Test Drive*; and *Stupidity*, among other works, and has written consistently for *ArtForum*, *ArtUS*, and *Vacarme* (Paris). She is a 2009 guest curator at the Centre Pompidou, where she offered a “Rencontre” with Werner Herzog, Judith Butler, Laurence Rickels, Jean-Luc Nancy, and others.

Peter Singer

called the “most influential” living philosopher by the *New Yorker*, is Ira W. Decamp Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University and Laureate Professor at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics (CAPPE), University of Melbourne. He has written many books, including *Animal Liberation*, a seminal text of the animal rights movement; *Practical Ethics*; and, most recently, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*.

Sunaura Taylor

is an artist, writer, and activist living in Oakland, California. She is disabled due to U.S. military pollution, a legacy that has affected all aspects of her work. Her artworks have been exhibited at venues across the country, including the Smithsonian Institution and the Berkeley Art Museum. She is the recipient of numerous awards including a 2004 Sacatar Foundation Fellowship and a 2008 Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant. Her published work includes the *Monthly Review* article “The Right Not to Work: Disability and Capitalism” and “Military Waste In Our Drinking Water” (with Astra Taylor), which was nominated for a 2007 Project Censored Award. Taylor is currently co-editing a book on disability and animal rights. She received her undergraduate degree in disability studies from Goddard College and holds an MFA from the University of California, Berkeley's department of art practice. Her website is www.sunaurataylor.org.

Cornel West

the Class of 1943 University Professor at Princeton University, has been heralded by *Newsweek* as an “eloquent prophet with attitude.” In his latest book, *Hope on a Tightrope*, he offers courageous commentary on issues that affect the lives of all Americans. Themes include Race, Leadership, Faith, Family, Philosophy, and Love and Service. His other books include the *New York Times* bestsellers *Race Matters*, which won the American Book Award, and *Democracy Matters*. West has won numerous awards and has received more than twenty honorary degrees. He also was an influential force in developing the storyline for the popular *Matrix* movie trilogy.

Slavoj Zizek

is a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic. He is a professor at the European Graduate School; International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, Birkbeck College, University of London; and a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. He has published over twenty books, including *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, *The Parallax View*, and *In Defense of Lost Causes*. He is also the subject of the feature documentary *Zizek!* directed by Astra Taylor and distributed by Zeitgeist Films.

ASTRA TAYLOR

Bio

Astra Taylor is a writer and documentary filmmaker. She was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1979 and raised in Athens, Georgia.

She holds an MA in Liberal Studies from the New School for Social Research and has been an instructor in sociology departments at the University of Georgia and State University of New York, New Paltz where she has taught classes on social theory, globalization, and the sociology of film. Her writing has appeared in the *Monthly Review*, the *Nation*, *Adbusters*, *Salon*, and other outlets.

In 2001 she spent two months in southern Senegal with a partner producing and directing (and later editing) *The Miracle Tree: Moringa Oleifera*, a 45-minute documentary shot on digital video. The project was commissioned by an international NGO to record efforts of a local sustainable development project to alleviate the plight of infant malnutrition.

In 2002 Astra associate produced *Persons of Interest*, a feature documentary directed by Allison Maclean (*Jesus' Son*) about the round up and detention of Muslims and Arabs in the aftermath of September 11th. The film was an official selection at the 2004 Sundance, Rotterdam, and Human Rights Watch film festivals and won the Amnesty International Humanitarian Award at the Chicago International Documentary Film Festival.

Astra then directed *Zizek!*, a feature documentary about the world's most famous philosopher. It premiered at the 2005 Toronto International Film Festival, is distributed in North America by Zeitgeist Films and the Institute for Contemporary Art in the UK, and was broadcast on the Sundance Channel.

Examined Life, a series of excursions with contemporary thinkers, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2008. A companion book will be published by The New Press in spring 2009.

One of *Filmmaker Magazine's* "25 New Faces to Watch" of 2006, Astra currently runs Hidden Driver Productions with Laura Hanna, which specializes in intellectual, cultural and political issues.

DIRECTOR'S Q & A

When did you become interested in philosophy?

My interest in philosophy goes back quite awhile. I was around twelve or thirteen when I first picked up Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, which was over my head even though the subject was something very important to me. During my first year of university I discovered "theory," to which I devoted myself before discovering filmmaking. What I love about philosophy is the way different theories present opportunities to look at the world anew. Film has a similar ability to shift perception, to alter the way we look at the world, so I think the two fields compliment each other well.

Most of the subjects who appear in *Examined Life* (Cornel West, Avital Ronell, Peter Singer, Anthony Appiah, Martha Nussbaum, Michael Hardt, Slavoj Zizek, and Judith Butler) are thinkers I have worked with or studied in the past or feel a special connection to. For example, I initially read Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* when I was a teenager wrestling with what it meant to be a "feminist." Later, Martha Nussbaum's work influenced me to reevaluate my thinking about the position of people with disabilities in our society. Thinkers like Slavoj Zizek and Michael Hardt regularly challenge my political assumptions. I've found Cornel West's speeches to be consistently inspiring and provocative (and he should be making even more of them now that he is a campaign advisor to Barack Obama). Finally, it was a graduate seminar lead by Avital Ronell (co-taught by the late Derrida) that inspired my desire to take philosophy out of the academy and make it more accessible to a non-specialized audience.

What inspired you to make *Examined Life*?

Many would agree that the world is facing a multitude of unprecedented problems, from global warming to growing economic inequality. In a way, this is part of why I wanted to make *Examined Life* right now – I feel that the myriad problems facing us demand more thinking than ever, not less.

That said, most people wouldn't assume philosophy would have anything useful to say on these issues. Often when you mention "philosophy" people's eyes kind of glaze over. The word conjures images of stodgy old white men pontificating on abstract matters completely irrelevant to those of us who live in the "real world." Or maybe folks assume that philosophy simply doesn't relate to their lives, or that people who are interested in the subject are unforgivably ponderous or pretentious.

I happen to think philosophy has something to add to the conversation, not that philosophers necessarily "have all the answers" but that they can help us ask different questions and see things in new ways.

Philosophy isn't necessarily the sort of subject that obviously lends itself to cinema. How did you translate the subject to the big screen?

Obviously, a lot of philosophy is very technical. But as Isaiah Berlin, echoing Bertrand Russell, once said, "the central visions of the great philosophers are essentially simple." When it comes to defending these central visions, things can get a bit complicated, but the heart of the matter is usually fairly intelligible and accessible. So my aim was to present the basic impulse or insight of a variety of philosophers in a way that was free of jargon and directly relatable to the audience's experiences.

How did you come up with the concept of the philosopher's walk for this film?

I was talking to my friend Aaron Levy, a curator and academic in Philadelphia, about the project and he suggested a potential subject and mentioned that the fellow was quite shy. Perhaps, Aaron mused, he'd be more comfortable if you filmed him while taking a walk instead of sitting down. At that moment a light bulb went off in my brain as I had recently read Rebecca Solnit's amazing book *Wanderlust*, which is a magisterial history of walking.

The walking theme is a pretty straightforward idea, but it's also one that has numerous levels of significance. Cinematically it provides an opportunity for movement, gesture, and variation of scene. Historically it speaks to philosophy's peripatetic origins and to the fact that many great philosophers were avid wanderers (Socrates, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Kierkegaard and Benjamin all come to mind). Symbolically, it illustrates my intention of taking philosophy out of the ivory tower. Politically, walking is under siege in our car-driven speed-obsessed culture. Culturally, we place little value on the peaceful, solitary reflection walking encourages.

How did you go about directing the project?

I began inviting people to appear in *Examined Life* in early 2007. Once someone expressed interest in participating, I started a conversation about the form their walk should take, keeping in mind how each segment would fit into the greater whole. Typically I had a specific theme in mind for them to discuss, something central to their work that I also felt would play well off the other segments I was planning. In some situations the subject and I discussed the various points they hoped to make, in order to make sure we were on the same page. In other cases we completely improvised, having a long extemporaneous and circuitous conversation, which I then had to find some center to in the editing room. Overall, I did my best to balance the need for pre-planning and rehearsal with my desire to make a film that was fresh and unforced, something that would hopefully convey the spontaneous life of the mind and the process (excuse the pun) of thinking on one's feet.

That was part of why I wanted to shoot this project outside, in the streets. I wanted uncontrolled things to happen, to pose challenges and provoke thoughts and reactions we couldn't anticipate. Some topics immediately lent themselves to a specific location, as in Peter Singer's discussion of consumer ethics (we shot along Fifth Avenue in Manhattan,

which is an upscale shopping district) and ecology for Slavoj Žižek (I knew I wanted film in a garbage dump), but other themes were less easy to illustrate. In those cases I asked if there was a location the subject felt a special connection to, or perhaps a site that holds personal significance or one related to their philosophic evolution. So some of the philosophers are in a spot they like visiting or walking along a route they walk everyday in real life. In some cases I simply chose a location that I felt suited the subject's temperament and that was logistically feasible and visually compelling.

How did you achieve wholeness with so many subjects?

Well, as Cornel West says at the end of the film, our obsession with wholeness can be problematic. I didn't want the film to wrap everything up or pretend to provide a definitive answer to the different and difficult questions it poses (after all, if we had watertight answers there wouldn't be any need for philosophical questioning any more). That said, I do hope the film has a cohesiveness despite the fact it is somewhat fragmented formally, in the sense that it is a series of vignettes. To achieve some sense of harmony the film was conceived, directed and edited so that all the subjects are, in a sense, talking about the same main topics – the search for meaning and our responsibilities to others in a broken world (by which I mean a world full of inequity and suffering, one beset by problems both interpersonal and political) – from different angles.

Related to the central themes of the film, I chose subjects that are concerned with social and ethical issues, which is probably a reflection of my personality and interests as much as anything else. So there are many branches of philosophy that are not touched on in *Examined Life*, like linguistic philosophy and logic and philosophy of mind, for example. These areas can all be fascinating but I felt I had to limit the field of topics from which I drew in order to achieve a sense of thematic unity.

SPHINX PRODUCTIONS
in co-production with **THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA**
in association with **ONTARIO MEDIA DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION, TVO**
and **KNOWLEDGE NETWORK**

present

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featuring

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

JUDITH BUTLER

MICHAEL HARDT

MARTHA NUSSBAUM

AVITAL RONELL

PETER SINGER

SUNAURA TAYLOR

CORNEL WEST

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Producer BILL IMPERIAL

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Director of Photography JOHN M. TRAN

Sound Design JOHN LAING

Editor ROBERT KENNEDY

Written and Directed by ASTRA TAYLOR

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