

# Cinema and Its Ghosts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida

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Interview conducted July 10, 1998 and November 6, 2000 in Paris. Transcribed and formatted by Stéphane Delorme.

When a philosopher admits to a “hypnotic fascination” with cinema, is it just chance that his thought leads him to encounter the ghosts haunting dark theaters?

—*Cahiers du cinéma*

It is not obvious that a journal such as *Cahiers du cinéma* would interview Jacques Derrida. Above all because, for a long time, Derrida seemed to be interested only in the phenomenon of writing, in its trace, in speech, in the voice. And then came several books: *Memoirs of the Blind*, around an exhibition at the Louvre, *Echographies of Television*, a conversation about that mass medium with Bernard Stiegler that affirmed a new interest in the image. And then too, a film, *Derrida's Elsewhere*, directed by Safaa Fathy, and a book *Tourner les mots*, cowritten with the film's director, which finally tackled the experience of cinema. That's all we needed to go and ask some questions of a philosopher who, even though he admits he's not a

cinophile, nevertheless has truly been thinking about the cinematographic apparatus, projection, and the ghosts that every normally constituted viewer feels an irresistible urge to encounter. Derrida's discourse, which resonates in the following interview, is thus that of neither a specialist nor a professor speaking from the height of commanding knowledge, but very simply that of a man who thinks and who goes back to the ontology of cinema while shedding new light on it.

*Cahiers du cinéma*: How did cinema enter your life?

**Derrida**: Very early. In Algiers, when I was ten or twelve years old, at the end of the war then right after the war. It was a vital way of getting out. I lived in a suburb of the city, El Biar. To go to the movies was an emancipation, getting away from the family. I remember well the names of all the movie houses in Algiers, I can see them still: The Vox, The Cameo, The Noon-Midnight, The Olympia . . . No doubt I went to the movies without being very selective. I saw everything, the French films made during the Occupation, and especially the American films that returned after 1942. I would be totally incapable of listing the titles of the films, but I remember the sort of films I saw. A *Tom Sawyer* for example, certain scenes of which came back to me recently: a cave where Tom is closed up with a little girl. A sexual emotion: I saw that a twelve-year-old boy could caress a little girl. I was about the same age. Of course a large part of one's sensual and erotic education comes from movies. You learn what a kiss is at the movies, before learning it in life. I remember that adolescent erotic thrill. I would be totally incapable of citing anything else. I have a passion for the cinema; it's a kind of hypnotic fascination, I could remain for hours and hours in a theater, even to watch mediocre things. But I have not the least memory for cinema. It's a culture that leaves no trace in me. It's virtually recorded, I've forgotten nothing, I also have notebooks where I keep reminders of the titles of films from which I don't remember a single image. I am not at all a cinophile in the classical sense of the term. Instead I'm a pathological case. During periods when I go to the movies a lot, particularly when I'm abroad in the United States where I spend my time in movie theaters, a constant repression erases the memory of these images that nonetheless fascinate me. In 1949, I arrived in Paris, for advanced preparatory school, and the rhythm continued, several shows a day sometimes, in the countless movie theaters of the Latin Quarter, especially the Champô.

*Cahiers du cinéma:* What is for you the first effect of film in the state of childhood? You mentioned the erotic dimension, which is certainly essential in the apprenticeship of images. But is it a relation to gestures, a relation to time, the body, space?

**Derrida:** If it wasn't the names of films, or the stories, or the actors that made an impression on something in me, it was surely another form of emotion that has its source in projection, in the very mechanism of projection. It is an emotion that is completely different from that of reading, which imprints a more present and active memory in me. Let's say that in the situation of a "voyeur," in the dark, I act out an incomparable liberation, a challenge to prohibitions of every sort. You are there, before the screen, invisible voyeur, permitted all possible projections, all identifications, without the least sanction and without the least work. Perhaps that's what I get from cinema: a way of freeing myself from prohibitions and especially a way of forgetting work. That's also why, no doubt, this cinematic emotion cannot, for me, take the form of knowledge, or even real memory. Because this emotion belongs to a totally different register, it must not be work, knowledge, or even memory. As for the impression cinema left in me, I would also underscore a more sociological or historical aspect: for a sedentary little kid from Algiers, cinema offered the extraordinary boon of travel. You could travel like crazy with the movies. Leaving aside American movies, which were exotic and familiar at the same time, French films spoke with a very particular voice, they bristled with recognizable scenery, they showed landscapes and interiors that were impressive for a young adolescent like me, who had never crossed the Mediterranean. So cinema was the scene of an intense learning experience at that time. Books didn't do the same thing for me. To go to the movies was immediately a guided tour. As for American film, for me who was born in 1930, it represented a sensual, free expedition that was hungry to conquer time and space. American movies arrived in Algiers in 1942, accompanied by what also made them powerful (including as a dream), music, dance, cigarettes . . . Cinema meant first of all "America." Cinema then followed me during my whole student life, which was difficult, anxious, tense. In this sense, it often acted on me like a drug, entertainment par excellence, uneducated escape, the right to wildness.

*Cahiers du cinéma:* Doesn't cinema allow, more so than the other arts, for an "uncultured" relation between the spectator and the image?

**Derrida:** No doubt. One can say it's an art that remains popular, even if that is unfair to all those producers, directors, critics who practice it with great refinement or experimentation. It is even the only great popular art. As for me, as quite an avid spectator, I remain, I even plant myself on the side of the popular: cinema is a major art of entertainment. One really must let it have that distinction. Of the great number of films I saw as a student, while I was boarding at Louis-le-Grand, I really only remember Malraux's *L'Espoir*; at the film club at the Lycée Montaigne, so you see that's not very much by way of a "cultivated" relation to old films. Since then, my mode of life has taken me away a little from cinema, confining it to specific times when it plays the role of pure feeling of escape. When I'm in New York or California, I see countless American films, both ordinary fare and films that are talked about because I'm very easy to please. That is a time when I have the freedom and the chance to experience again the popular relation to cinema that's so indispensable for me.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** One can imagine that, when you are in a movie theater in New York or California, in a space unconnected to your life of academic knowledge, the screen continues to impress on you images that come straight from your childhood or adolescence . . .

**Derrida:** It's a privileged and original relation to the image that I maintain thanks to cinema. I know that there exists in me a type of emotion linked to images, which comes from far away. It does not get formulated in the manner of scholarly or philosophical culture. For me, the movies are a hidden, secret, avid, gluttonous joy—in other words, an infantile pleasure. This is what they must remain, and no doubt it is what bothers me a bit in talking to you because the space of *Cahiers* signifies a cultivated, theoretical relation to cinema.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** But what is interesting is that this relation to cinema, which is certainly different, often depends on the same kind of films. Traditionally, at the base of *Cahiers*, is American cinema, and not the most prestigious, but B movies, little films, Hollywood directors . . .

**Derrida:** I would say then that *Cahiers*, out of intellectual dandyism, out of cultivated nonconformism, finds agreement with a series of films to which I surrender out of more childish enjoyment.

Everything is permitted at the movies, including this coming together of heterogeneous sorts of audiences and relations to the screen. Within the same person, moreover. There is for example a competition in me between at least two ways of looking at film or even at television. One comes from childhood, pure emotional pleasure; the other, which is more scholarly and strict, deciphers the signs emitted by the images in function of my more “philosophical” interests or questions.

*Cahiers du cinéma:* In *Echographies of Television*, you speak directly about cinema. About images more generally, specifically television, but also about cinema with regard to the film in which you had a role. You connect cinema to a particular experience, that of phantomality . . .

**Derrida:** The cinematic experience belongs thoroughly to spectrality, which I link to all that has been said about the specter in psychoanalysis—or to the very nature of the trace. The specter, which is neither living nor dead, is at the center of certain of my writings, and it’s in this connection that, for me, a thinking of cinema would perhaps be possible. What’s more, the links between spectrality and filmmaking occasion numerous reflections today. Cinema can stage phantomality almost head-on, to be sure, as in a tradition of fantasy film, vampire or ghost films, certain works of Hitchcock . . . This must be distinguished from the thoroughly spectral structure of the cinematic image. Every viewer, while watching a film, is in communication with some work of the unconscious that, by definition, can be compared with the work of haunting, according to Freud. He calls this the experience of what is “uncanny” (*unheimlich*). Psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic reading, is at home at the movies. First of all, psychoanalysis and filmmaking are really contemporaries; numerous phenomena linked to projection, to spectacle, to the perception of this spectacle, have psychoanalytic equivalents. Walter Benjamin realized this very quickly when he connected almost straightaway the two processes: film analysis and psychoanalysis. Even the seeing and perception of detail in a film are in direct relation with psychoanalytic procedure. Enlargement does not only enlarge; the detail gives access to another scene, a heterogeneous scene. Cinematic perception has no equivalent; it is alone in being able to make one understand through experience what a psychoanalytic practice is: hypnosis, fascination, identification, all these terms and procedures are common to film and to psychoanalysis, and this is the sign of a “thinking together” that seems primordial to me.

What's more, a screening session or séance is only a little longer than an analytic one. You go to the movies to be analyzed, by letting all the ghosts appear and speak. You can, in an economical way (by comparison with a psychoanalytic séance), let the specters haunt you on the screen.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** You said that you could write about a very specific aspect of film, which is to say . . .

**Derrida:** If I were to write about film, what would interest me above all is its mode and system of *belief*. There is an altogether singular mode of *believing* in cinema: a century ago, an unprecedented experience of belief was invented. It would be fascinating to analyze the system of *credit* in all the arts: how one believes a novel, certain moments of a theatrical representation, what is inscribed in painting and, of course, which is something else altogether, what film shows and tells us. At the movies, you believe without believing, but this believing without believing remains a believing. On the screen, whether silent or not, one is dealing with apparitions that, as in Plato's cave, the spectator believes, apparitions that are sometimes idolized. Because the spectral dimension is that of neither the living nor the dead, of neither hallucination nor perception, the modality of believing that relates to it must be analyzed in an absolutely original manner. This particular phenomenology was not possible before the movie camera because this experience of believing is linked to a particular technique, that of cinema. It is historical through and through, with that supplementary aura, that particular memory that lets us project ourselves into films of the past. That is why the experience of seeing a film is so rich. It lets one see new specters appear while remembering (and then projecting them in turn onto the screen) the ghosts haunting films *already* seen.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** As if there were several levels of phantomality . . .

**Derrida:** Yes. And certain filmmakers try to play with these different temporalities of specters, like Ken McMullen, the director of a film, *Ghost Dance*, in which I had a role. There is elementary spectrality, which is tied to the technical definition of cinema; and within the fiction, McMullen puts on stage characters haunted by the history of revolutions, by those ghosts that rise up again from history and from texts (the Communards, Marx, etc.). Cinema thus allows one to cultivate what could be called "grafts" of spectrality; it inscribes traces of ghosts on a general framework, the projected film, which is itself a ghost. It's a captivating phenomenon and, theoretically,

this is what would interest me in cinema as object of analysis. Spectral memory, cinema is a magnificent mourning, a magnified work of mourning. And it is ready to let itself be imprinted by all the memories in mourning, that is to say, by the tragic or epic moments of history. It is thus these successive periods of mourning, linked to history and to cinema, that today “put in motion” [*font marcher*] the most interesting characters. The grafted bodies of these ghosts are the very stuff of film plots. But what often comes back in these films, whether European or American, is the spectral memory of a time when there was as yet no cinema. These films are “fascinated” by the nineteenth century, for example, the legend of the West in Eastwood’s Westerns, the invention of cinema in Coppola, or the Commune in Ken McMullen’s film. In the same way, cinema is at work more and more frequently in the references made in books, paintings, or photographs. No art, no narrative can neglect cinema today. Nor can philosophy, moreover. Let’s say that it weighs heavily with the weight of its ghosts. And these ghosts are, in very diverse and often very inventive ways, incorporated by the “competitors” of cinema.

*Cahiers du cinéma:* Why is cinema the most popular art form, and is it still?

**Derrida:** To answer this question—the great question—one must combine several types of analysis. First an “internal” analysis of the cinematic medium that would take into account the immediacy of emotions and apparitions such as they are imprinted on the screen and in the minds of spectators, in their memories, their bodies, their desires. Next an “ideological” analysis that notes how this spectral technique of apparitions was very quickly tied into a worldwide market of gazes that allowed any reel of printed film to be reproduced in thousands of copies liable to touch millions of viewers throughout the world, and to do this quasi simultaneously, collectively, since if cinema were a strictly individual or even domestic form of consumption, this wouldn’t work. This conjunction is unprecedented because in a very brief time it unites the immediacy of apparitions and emotions (unlike what any other representation can propose) with a financial investment that no other art can equal. To understand cinema, one has to think the ghost together with capital, the latter being itself a spectral thing.

*Cahiers du cinéma:* Why does cinema “work” only thanks to the community of vision, the projection room? Why do specters appear to groups rather than to individuals?

**Derrida:** Let's begin by understanding this from the point of view of spectators, of perception and projection. Each viewer projects something private onto the screen, but all these personal "ghosts" combine into a collective representation. One must thus advance very cautiously with this idea of *community* of vision or of representation. Cinema, by its very definition—that of projection in a theater—calls up collectivity, communal spectacle and interpretation. But at the same time, there exists a fundamental disconnection: in the movie theater, each viewer is alone. That's the great difference from live theater, whose mode of spectacle and interior architecture thwart the solitude of the spectator. This is the profoundly political aspect of theater: the audience is one and expresses a militant, collective presence, and if the audience becomes divided, it's around some battles, conflicts, some intrusion of another into the heart of the public. This is what makes me often unhappy at the theater and happy at the movies: the power of being alone in the face of the spectacle, the disconnection that cinematic representation supposes.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** It's your problem with connection?

**Derrida:** I don't like to know that there is a viewer next to me, and I dream, at least, of finding myself alone, or almost, in a movie theater. So I wouldn't use the word "community" for the movie theater. I wouldn't use either the word "individuality," too solitary. The suitable expression is that of "singularity," which displaces, undoes the social bond, and replays it otherwise. It is for this reason that there exists in a movie theater a neutralization of the psychoanalytic sort: I am alone with myself, but delivered over to the play of all kinds of transference. And no doubt this is why I love the cinema so much, and that, even though I don't go often, in a certain way it is indispensable for me. There exists, at the root of the belief in cinema, an extraordinary conjunction between the masses—it's an art of the masses, which addresses the collectivity and receives collective representations—and the singular. This mass is dissociated, disconnected, neutralized. At the movies, I react "collectively," but I also learn to be alone: an experience of social dissociation that moreover probably owes a lot to America's mode of existence. This solitude in the face of the ghost is a major test of the cinematic experience. This experience was anticipated, dreamed of, hoped for by the other arts, literature, painting, theater, poetry, philosophy, well before the technical invention of cinema. Let's say that cinema needed to be invented to fulfill a certain desire for relation to ghosts. The dream preceded the invention.



**Cahiers du cinéma:** In a recent book on Maurice Blanchot, you return to a question dear to you and that you already addressed, with regard to the image, in *Echographies*: the status of testimony. It is likewise a central question for cinema: what cinema may be used for, what it can believe in. Cinema testifies, attempts to provide proof . . .

**Derrida:** In Western law, the filmed document does not have the value of proof. There exists, in our Western idea of belief, an irreducible mistrust of the image in general and the filmed image in particular. This can be interpreted as a form of archaism, the idea that only perception, speech, or writing in their real presence have the right to belief, are *credible*. This legal code has never been adapted to the possibility of filmed testimony. Conversely, one can also say that this juridical mistrust of the filmed image takes account of the modernity of the cinematic image, the infinite reproducibility and the editing of representations: the always possible synthesis, that links belief to illusion. An image, and what is more in a film, is always liable to interpretation: the specter is an enigma and the ghosts who parade past in the images are mysteries. One may, one must believe them, but this has no probative value. Consider the Rodney King affair in Los Angeles, where the whole framework of the accusation was based on a video tape recorded by chance by a witness of the beating of the black man by the police. The witness could furnish only these images; he had seen through the eye of the camera, and this tape came to be at the center of abundant, never-ending discussions and interpretations. If the witness had seen and reported the facts, his word, in a certain manner, would have been more probative. The image of the facts, while it corresponded to a state of society and aroused a kind of revolt, in particular in the black community, was paradoxically less worthy of belief on the part of the justice system and white authority. More fundamentally, it is the question of the mark or imprint that is posed by this mistrust: the genetic imprint is more credible, more accredited than the cinematic imprint.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** Speaking of film as imprint, what do you think of a film like Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*?

**Derrida:** It is a testimony-film. But it confers on the acts of testimony a truly major role since it systematically refuses to use archival images so as to encounter the witnesses—their speech, their bodies, their gestures—in the present. It is thus also a great film of memory, which restores memory against representation and



Photo by Peggy Kamuf.

against, of course, reconstitution. The present prevents representation and, in this sense, I think that Lanzmann illustrates in the best way possible what the trace can be in film. *Shoah* is constantly seizing imprints, traces; the whole force of the film and its emotion depends on these ghostly traces without representation. The trace is the “that-took-place-there” of the film, what I call survivance. For all of these witnesses are survivors: they lived *that* and say so. Cinema is the absolute simulacrum of absolute survivance. It recounts to us what we cannot get over, it recounts death to us. By its own spectral miracle, it points out to us what ought not to leave any trace. It is thus doubly trace: trace of the testimony itself, trace of the forgetting, trace of absolute death, trace of the without-trace, trace of the extermination. It is the rescue, by the film, of what remains without salvation, salvation for the without-salvation, the experience of pure survivance that testifies. I think that the viewer is seized hold of in the face of “that.” This form that has been found for survivance is indisputable. It is certainly an illustrious illustration of the talking cinematograph.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** What is it in *Shoah* that seems to you specifically cinematographic?

**Derrida:** This presentation without representation of testimonial speech is striking because it is “film.” *Shoah* would have been much

less powerful and credible as a purely audible document. The presentation of the trace is not a simple presentation, a representation, or an image: it takes on a body, matches gesture with speech, recounts and inscribes itself in a landscape. The ghosts have survived, they are re-presentified, they appear in the whole of their speech, which is phenomenal and fantastic, that is, spectral (of the revenants-survivors). Before being historical, political, archival, the power of *Shoah* is thus essentially cinematographic. Because the cinematic image allows the thing itself (a witness who has spoken, one day, in some place) to be not reproduced but produced once again “itself there.” This immediacy of the “itself there,” but without representable presence, produced with each viewing, is the essence of cinema and of Lanzmann’s film.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** This manner of presenting the unrepresentable, in *Shoah*, has likewise rendered suspect any reconstitution and any representation of the extermination. How do you explain that?

**Derrida:** What appears by disappearing in *Shoah*, this absence of direct or reconstituted images of what “it” was, of what is being spoken about, puts us into relation with the events of the Shoah, that is, the unrepresentable itself. Whereas all the films—whatever may otherwise be their strengths or their faults, which is not the question—that have represented the extermination can put us into relation only with something reproducible, reconstitutable, that is, with what the Shoah is not. This reproducibility is a terrible weakening of the intensity of memory. The Shoah must remain at once within the “it has taken place” and within the impossible that “it” has taken place and be representable.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** The force of *Shoah* has a lot to do with the recording of the voices. This is something to which you are very sensitive. You have, for example, recorded readings of texts, *Cinders* and *Circonfession*, where you participate entirely in your own voice.

**Derrida:** *Shoah* is much more than a recording of people speaking . . . But, to answer your question, yes, the recording of speech is one of the major phenomena of the twentieth century. It gives living presence a possibility, which has no equivalent and no precedent, of “being there” once again. The greatness of cinema, of course, is to have integrated voice recording at a certain moment of its history. This was not an addition, a supplementary element, but rather a return to the origins of cinema allowing it to be still more fully achieved. The voice, in cinema, does not add something: it

is cinema because it is of the same nature as the recording of the world's movement. I don't believe at all in the idea that one must separate images—pure cinema—from speech: they are of the same essence, that of a “quasi presentation” of an “itself there” of the world whose past will be, forever, radically absent, unrepresentable in its living presence.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** Another specificity of cinema concerns montage. What do you think of this technique that allows one to assemble, reassemble, disassemble? In its very matter, cinema has no doubt gone furthest in the use of reflection on narrativity. Can one establish a link between the concept of “deconstruction” that you forged and the idea of montage in cinema?

**Derrida:** There is no real synchronization, but this comparison is important to me. Between writing of the deconstructive type that interests me and cinema, there is an essential link. It is the exploitation in writing, whether it be Plato's, Dante's, or Blanchot's, of all the possibilities of montage, that is, of plays with the rhythms, of grafts of quotations, insertions, changes in tone, changes in language, crossings between “disciplines” and the rules of art, the arts. Cinema, in this domain, has no equivalent, except perhaps music. But writing is, as it were, inspired and aspired by this “idea” of montage. Moreover, writing—or let us say discursivity—and cinema are drawn into the same technical and thus aesthetic evolution, that of the increasingly refined, rapid, accelerated possibilities offered by technological renewal (computers, Internet, synthetic images). There now exists, in a certain way, an unequaled offer or demand for deconstruction, in writing as well as in film. The thing is to know what to do with it. Cutting and pasting, recomposition of texts, the accelerating insertion of quotations, everything you can do with a computer, all this brings writing closer and closer to cinematic montage, and vice versa. The result is that, at a moment when “technicity” increases more and more, film is paradoxically becoming more “literary” and vice versa: it is obvious that writing, for some time now, has shared somewhat a certain cinematographic vision of the world. Deconstruction or not, a writer is always an editor [*monteur*]. Today he or she is that even more so.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** Do you yourself feel like a filmmaker as you write?

**Derrida:** I don't believe it's an exaggeration to say that, consciously, when I write a text I “project” a sort of film. That is my project

and I project it. What interests me most about writing is less, as one might say, the “content” than the “form”: the composition, the rhythm, the sketch of a particular narrativity. A parade of spectral powers producing certain effects that are fairly comparable to the progression of a film. It is accompanied by speech, which I elaborate as if on a separate track, however paradoxical that may seem. It is cinema, unquestionably. When and if I take pleasure in writing, that is what gives me pleasure. My pleasure is not, above all, to tell “the” truth or “the” meaning of the “truth”; it is in the *mise en scène*, whether that be through writing in books or through speech in teaching. And I am very envious of those filmmakers who, today, work on montage using hypersensitive machines that allow one to compose a film in an extremely precise way. That is what I am constantly looking for in writing or speech, even if, in my case, the work is more artisanal and even if it’s my weakness to believe that the “effect” of meaning or the “effect” of truth still makes for the best cinema.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** I would like to talk about the film *Derrida’s Elsewhere* by Safaa Fathy, in which you are both subject and actor. It seems to me that this experience led you to think about the functioning of the cinema machine (as concerns filming and montage) and about cinema in general.

**Derrida:** There were several periods in this experience, which I would be tempted to call an “apprenticeship film” the way one says an “apprenticeship novel” or “Bildungsroman.” Beyond everything I was able to learn, understand, or approach indirectly, nothing equals this inflexible experience that leaves little room for the body to withdraw. I managed to understand many things about cinema in general, about the technology, the market (because there were some production problems between Arte and Gloria Films). In this sense, it was an “apprenticeship film.” On the other hand, you alluded to *Tourner les mots* [the book Derrida drew from this experience of cinema, published by Éditions Galilée in 2000], where I refer to myself as the Actor. While writing this text, I played with capitalizing the words Actor and Author; it was a game, but a serious game; I had to play what was supposed to be my own character, who is himself but one character (each of us has several social characters). So, it was a matter for me of playing as Actor several of my characters, which had been chosen by the Author who made very many choices that I had to take into account. For example, the Author, Safaa Fathy, made the decision to remove me from French

space; she deliberately chose to show me *elsewhere* by reconstituting some more or less fantasized genealogies—in Algeria, in Spain, in the United States. I had to learn to overcome my own inhibitions about exposing myself in front of the camera and to obey the Author's choices. In a final period, after the filming and editing (which I had nothing at all to do with), each of us separately wrote the texts that are collected in *Tourner les mots*. That allowed me to say a certain number of things that do not replace the film but that play with it.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** The text redistributes the film in another dimension and a different order; there is a connection inasmuch as the two concern and complete each other.

**Derrida:** The film and the book are at once connected to each other and radically independent. I try to show how, in a certain number of its image sequences, the film depends on some French idiom, some untranslatable idiom, as for example the word *ailleurs* ["elsewhere"]. In this text, I pose the question of the French language insofar as it determines, from within, the flow of images and insofar as it must cross the frontier, since we're talking about a film coproduced by Arte and destined immediately to be shown in non-French-speaking European countries. What was going to happen with the translation? In principle, words are translatable (although here the experience is daunting at every step), but what links images and words is not, and thus involves some stakes that are quite original. One must accept that, in its cinematic specificity, a film is linked to untranslatable idioms and that translation must take place without losing the cinematic idiom that links the word to the image.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** Is there not another problem that perhaps you felt, within the disjunction between seeing and speaking?

**Derrida:** Yes, this is one of the most interesting risks of the film. That is what the book's title stresses. "Tourner les mots" means to avoid words, to go around them, allow the cinematic to resist the authority of discourse; at the same time, it was a matter of turning words, that is, of finding sentences that were not sentences for interviews, courses, lectures, sentences already favorable for a cinematic frame; finally one has to hear "tourner," one has to understand how to "tourner" in the sense of shooting or filming words. And how to film words that become images which are inseparable

from the body, not only from the body of the one who says them, but from the body, from the iconic ensemble, of what nevertheless remain words, with their sonority, tone, tempo of words? These words may sometimes be snatched up during an improvisation or else read out, because there are a few passages read by the actor or readable on a street sign. The places are never identified; they melt into each other; they share the common features of Southern California, Spain, Algeria, coastal, Mediterranean places; and the only moment when one can identify them by a proper name is something that is read silently on a street sign. It's an experience that seeks to be properly cinematic and yet does not sacrifice the discourse that obeys the law of film. It is often a question in this film of the theme of address, destination, the indetermination of the addressee. Who addresses what to whom? What counts in the image is not merely what is immediately visible, but also the words that inhabit the images, the invisibility that determines the logic of the images, that is, interruption, ellipsis, the whole zone of invisibility that presses on visibility. And the technique of interruption in this film is very savvy—in this regard, I often speak and so does Safaa Fathy of anacoluthon. This interruption of the image does not interrupt the effect of the image; it extends the force to which visibility gives momentum. The interrupted sequence either continues at another moment of the film or else it does not continue and it is up to the addressee, what is called the spectator, to orient him- or herself, to let things thread their way, to follow the stitches or not. Consequently, the body of the image qua image is shot through with invisibility. Not necessarily the sonorous invisibility of words, but another invisibility, and I believe that anacoluthon, ellipsis, interruption form perhaps what is proper to this film. What can be seen in the film has less importance no doubt than the unsaid, the invisible that is cast like a throw of the dice, relayed or not (it's up to the addressee to answer) by other texts, other films.

It's a film about mourning (the death of cats, the death of my mother), and it's a film in mourning for itself. In every work, there is such a sacrifice: nevertheless, in the writing of a text or a book, even though one must also throw out, sacrifice, exclude, the constraints are fewer, they are less external; when one writes a book, one does not have to obey, as is the case here, such a harsh, rigid commercial or mediatic law. That's why the book was a kind of breathing space.

*Cahiers du cinéma:* What you say about your experience of the film relates to more general concepts of cinema and television, such as the question of the specter.

**Derrida:** The theme of spectrality is presented as such in the film. As are mourning, sexual difference, addressing, inheritance. Spectrality came back regularly, even as an image, because one sees the specter of my mother, a phantom cat, a siamese cat who resembles the dead cat like a twin. This theme is treated both discursively and in images. And, elsewhere, in *Echographies of Television*, I had broached this question of the spectral dimension of the televisual or cinematic image, the question of virtualization. It has political stakes, which also shows up in *Specters of Marx*. All of this forms an inextricable network of motifs that are filmed the way one films cinema itself, since cinema is an example of what is in question here. In other words, it is as if spectral images came and said to you: we are spectral images (but without speculating on the academism of authority, of the specular *self*-referentiality). How does one film a specter that says: I am a specter? Along with, naturally, the somewhat troubling or even sinister aspect of the afterlife. For one knows that an image can survive, like a text. One could see these images not only after the death of my little brother, my cat, my mother, and so on, but after my own death. And this would work in the same manner. It has to do with an effect of intrinsic virtualization that marks any technical reproducibility, as Benjamin would say. It is a film on technical reproducibility: one sees both nature in its wildest state, the ebb and flow of waves in California, Spain, or Algeria, and machines for reproducing, recording, archiving.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** The ghost was thought about at a certain moment in film theory but, today, this idea goes against the dominant conception of the image, namely, that there is supposedly a consistency of the visible in which one ought to believe.

**Derrida:** In a spontaneous ideology of the image, one often forgets two things: technicity and belief. Technicity, namely, where the image (news reporting or film) is supposed to put us face to face with the thing itself, without tricks or artifacts; people want to forget that technology can absolutely transform, recompose, artificialize the thing. And then there is the very strange phenomenon that is belief. Even in a fiction film, a phenomenon of belief, of “pretend as if,” has a specificity that is very difficult to analyze: one “believes” a film more. One believes a novel less or in another way. As for music, that’s something else again, it does not imply any belief. As soon as there is novelistic representation or cinematic fiction, a phenomenon of belief is carried by the representation. Spectrality is an element in which belief is neither assured nor disputed. That is why I believe one must connect the question of technicity with



that of faith, in the religious and fiduciary sense, namely, the credit granted to an image. And to the phantasm. In Greek, and not only in Greek, *fantasma* designates the image and the revenant. The *fantasma* is a specter.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** What do you think of the filmed images of the liberation of the camps in relation to written texts?

**Derrida:** *Shoah* is a text of language as much as it is a corpus of images. They are “filmed words” [*mots tournés*], in a certain manner. Filmed speech is not speech captured as such on filmstock; it is speech that is interpreted, for example interrupted, restarted, repeated, put into a situation. To make a work (for the archive is also a work) accessible is to submit an interpretation to an interpretation.

**Cahiers du cinéma:** Was the power of the image greater than the text by Robert Antelme—*The Human Species*—which at the time did not have much impact?

**Derrida:** Or even now. It is a very important testimony but it did not have the power of distribution of a cinematic work. I don't want to have to choose between the two. I don't believe that one can take the place of the other. Moreover, there are many images in *The Human Species*. It is also a film-book in a certain way. *Shoah* is a text-film, a body of words, embodied speech. The time it takes to discover testimonies, the unconscious path that leads to the archives is something that deserves reflection. There is a (technical and psychic) time for the political lifting of repression. I was recently rereading (for something I would be talking about elsewhere) Sartre's *Reflections on the Jewish Question*, which was written after the war and some pages of which were written in 1944. The way he talks about the camps, very briefly, is rather strange. Did he know about them or not? After the war, there was no discussion of what happened at Auschwitz. The name Auschwitz (not to mention the name Shoah) were inaudible, unknown, or silenced. A psychoanalysis is necessary of the political field: of the impossible mourning, of repression. Benjamin is once again a necessary reference here: he linked the technical question of cinema and the question of psychoanalysis. Blowing up a detail is something both the movie camera and psychoanalysis do. By blowing up the detail one is doing something else besides enlarging it; one changes the perception of the thing itself. One accedes to another space, to a

heterogeneous time. This is true for both the time of the archives and of testimony.

***Cahiers du cinéma:*** Do you think the image is an inscription of memory or a confiscation of memory?

**Derrida:** Both. It is immediately an inscription, a preservation, either of the image itself at the moment it is taken, or of the memory act that the image speaks of. In the film, *Derrida's Elsewhere*, I evoke the past. There is both the moment *in which* I am speaking and the moment *of which* I am speaking. This already makes for two memories implicated in each other. But since this inscription is exposed to cutting, selection, interpretive choice, it is both a chance and a confiscation, a violent appropriation by both the Author *and* myself. When I speak about my past, whether voluntarily or not, I select, I inscribe, and I exclude. I don't believe there are archives that only preserve; this is something I try to point out in a short book, *Archive Fever*. The archive is a violent initiative taken by some authority, some power; it takes power for the future, it *pre-occupies* the future: it confiscates the past, the present, and the future. Everyone knows there is no such thing as innocent archives.

## Contributors

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**Jacques Derrida** (1930–2004) was the author of numerous groundbreaking books, including *Of Grammatology*, *Dissemination*, *Writing and Difference*, *The Truth in Painting*, *Archive Fever*, *Specters of Marx*, *Without Alibi*, *Rogues*, and *The Beast and the Sovereign*. His legacy also consists of more than forty volumes of his seminars, which have begun to be published in both French and English. The translation of Derrida's 2001 interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* has been published with the generous permission of Marguerite Derrida.

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