

## Theory & Event

### Theory & Event

Volume 7, Issue 2, 2004

Johns Hopkins University Press

Review

 Viewed | [Save](#)

[View Citation](#)

[Additional Information](#)



## Derrida, Now and Then, Here and There

David Wills — (bio)

Safaa Fathy (1999) *Derrida's Elsewhere [D'ailleurs Derrida]*, La Sept/ARTE/GLORIA Films, 68 minutes, color.



Click for larger view

[View full resolution](#)

A documentary on Jacques Derrida would seem to face the challenge of three competing aims: its own cinematic quality or integrity, the person or image of Derrida, and the force of his writing as represented by what he says before the camera. Safaa Fathy's *Derrida's Elsewhere* chooses to concentrate on the image and voice of its subject, somewhat at the expense of its own construction as cinematic object. Derrida has, as it were, been allowed to script this film. Thus there is a total absence of narrative or descriptive voice-over and an almost total absence of interlocution by Fathy or anyone else. Apart from Derrida himself, and Fathy's readings of a couple of extracts from Derrida's work, the only other voice heard is that of Jean-Luc Nancy. And apart from the image of Derrida himself (plus a few archival glimpses of his mother and son), "accidental" or "occasional" images of Fathy herself as well as friends, family and associates such as Hélène Cixious, Marguerite Derrida, and Hillis Miller (all of whom remain unidentified), Nancy is the only other actor the spectator sees. Fathy's success therefore is twofold. In the first place it derives from the decors she uses to frame Derrida's words — Algeria, Laguna Beach, Irvine, Toledo, Ris-Orangis, Rue d'Ulm, Boulevard Raspail — and from the autonomous shots taken of those decors, that sometimes intersperse or otherwise accompany what he is saying, causing his words to be haunted by images from elsewhere. Fathy creates from those filmic juxtapositions a type of aesthetic and conceptual superposition with the result that in spite of his overwhelming presence in front of the camera — speaking, strolling, posing, looking — the effect is finally what we seek in to ensure you get the best experience of the film on our website. With the film's site on the second page, not be surprised

importantly, Fathy's film succeeds thanks to certain thematic threads that, although they are of course woven by the coherence of Derrida's discourse, are used to structure the film, and to tie "central" preoccupations such as writing to the seemingly diverse questions of circumcision and forgiveness.

Now the competing aims I just referred to may well exist in respect of any documentary, and indeed, the mode of a documentary in general involves "letting speak," letting witnesses speak, allowing the images to tell the truth. But this question becomes all the more pertinent in the case of Derrida. This is so in the first place because, as his work shows, he has much to say, and however much he resists being asked to extemporize, once he feels comfortable enough he will inevitably begin to verbalize with as much insight and intelligence as when he writes. But in the second place, the very question of speaking as a witness is something that has preoccupied Derrida in his texts of the last ten to fifteen years. Safaa Fathy has been particularly sensitive to that question 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.

In fact, because witnessing — as *actual instance* and as technology — so preoccupies Derrida, the effects of the film that could be called properly cinematic, that is to say whatever effects there are of the fact that this is a documentary *film* of Jacques Derrida, derive more from interventions he himself makes than from decisions related to its production. In this respect Fathy's film exists somewhat in contrast to the other Derrida documentary, Kirby Dick and Amy Kofman's *Derrida* (Jane Doe Films, 2002), yet even there Derrida cannot avoid making the fact of his being in front of the camera an explicit topic of discussion, as indeed he had already in the "filmed book" that is *Echographies* (**Derrida and Stiegler 2002**), and as indeed he had in his long-term refusal to be photographed.<sup>1</sup>

In an uncanny scene early in Fathy's film, shot in front of an aquarium, Derrida declares that he feels like a fish, being looked at by, and made subject to the camera in the same way that the fish in the tanks are under the view and surveillance of visitors to the museum; and above all, being made to wait. He points to the "untranslatability" of the relation to time experienced by different species, which strikes him whenever he sees an animal looking at him, and implicitly relates that in turn to the temporal disjunction inherent in photography. In the middle of the film, Fathy allows narrative time to be disrupted when she leaves in the film a shot of Derrida asking the camera whether he can add something. In other words, although he will go on to recount the rest of the story he is telling, he is first shown asking or deciding to do so, as if the editing decision were being made in favor of his directorial imperatives on the one hand, and disjunctiveness itself on the other. Time is in question once more much later, when the film shows Derrida posing for some still photographs and agonizing over the fact that whereas a snapshot supposedly requires an investment of only a few seconds, he is experiencing this shoot as interminable, less photography than hypnosis, a prolongation of the strange *mise en demeure*, the requirement to keep still as if being assigned to residence, that characterizes photography (see **Derrida 1998**).

There is therefore as much a temporal disjunction as a spatial one to be understood in the title of Fathy's film. In fact, the French title, *D'ailleurs, Derrida*, means "Moreover Derrida" before it means something like "Derrida from Elsewhere," emphasizing a logical and temporal shift before a spatial one. And although it could not not be the case, by definition, but also once Fathy's film requires Derrida to transport himself to the places of his past, visiting the houses where he grew up in Algiers, but also driving on the back roads of Algeria the way he did with his father the travelling salesman (see **Malabou and Derrida 2004**, 32), the autobiographical question is articulated principally as a question of time. Derrida brings to his role a resistance to the law of the camera that is imposed on his body, a law, like that of writing, which inevitably functions and decrees itself through time. In the film's opening sequence writing or deconstruction is said to proceed from a "strange reference to an elsewhere" that is qualified as that of "childhood," "the other side of the Mediterranean," "French culture," "Europe," an elsewhere that is in oneself, in one's heart, "in the body." But immediately after that what is emphasized is the fact of writing's being "finite/finished [*finie*]," and close to the end he is seen musing on the possibility of reliving everything exactly as he has already lived it, good and bad, and declaring that what causes the anguish, fear and sadness of approaching death is the problem that the significance of one's life is only determined in the last moment, and the past that one thought to have lived as positive might then be read as something opposite.

The temporal emphasis, especially by means of disjunctions, but also repetitions, structures his (post)colonial history (the synagogue his family frequented had been a mosque and reverted to being a mosque after Algerian independence); just as it structures memories of his mother (writing "Circumfession" after seeing El Greco's *Burial of Count Orgaz*, a year after his mother "died" and was resurrected [see **Bennington and Derrida 1993**, 147–53]); and his academic life (thirty years as student and teacher in the same Paris street, twenty years giving his seminar in the same room at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, teaching at 5:00 p.m. on a Wednesday for thirty years). But I am not simply repeating a tautological fact here, namely that time passes, and that an explicitly biographical film will necessarily deal with the passage of time, but rather pointing to the extent to which the film, by means of an image track that emphasizes spatial displacement, and a soundtrack by Derrida that speaks of time, reinforces the definition given to writing, trace or spacing in *Of Grammatology* as "articulation of space and time, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space" (**Derrida 1974**, 68).

*Derrida's Elsewhere* says very little about the biography of its subject; instead, it shows him in Algeria, Paris and California, teaching and writing. Nor does it quote much from his work, restricting itself to "Circumfession." But for that very reason it lets both subject and work speak, especially of writing, of the Marrano, of circumcision, of forgiveness and of hospitality. And since the subject is before us less as textual matter than as corporeal matter, to the extent that that distinction can be maintained. What will be foregrounded, especially in versions of the writing of the body. But it is here that we really understand to what extent Derrida has, as it were, been permitted to script this film. For the version of writing, or the perspective on writing that is expounded in *Derrida's Elsewhere*, and which is thematically linked to a number of other

preoccupations of Derrida's recent work, is one that relates explicitly to filmmaking. Writing is finite, we are told, because inscription also means selection, cutting, excision. The subject of writing — the topic of writing but also Derrida as “proponent” of writing, and Derrida as writing subject — will figure in a film that is itself writing inasmuch as it involves editorial excision.

And it is by means of this perspective on writing, that of inscription as excision, that the film, for all its backgrounding of the autobiographical, reveals itself to be profoundly autobiographical, or at least a film on the subject of the autobiographical as understood by its subject Jacques Derrida. “Wherever there is trace, cutting, incision, inscription, mark on the body,” he explains, “one finds a figure of circumcision . . . In all the texts where I speak of mark, date, Shibboleth, trace, inscription, I am signaling in the direction of circumcision, and even of *my* circumcision.” In this sense the great unwritten, and unwritable book on circumcision that he speaks of here, and in “Circumfession,” a book that would be greater than the sublime (his name for his library) itself, consisting only of projects, sketches and fragments, constitutes precisely the *traces* of his autobiography, the writing of his body on his body.

In the fragment of Derrida's seminar in Paris seen in the film, we learn that it is on the basis of a wound, something that leaves a scar within “living tissue,” that the possibility of forgiveness arises. An autobiography that referred to circumcision would thus be caught within a certain aporia of forgiveness: the circumcised subject is wounded by a law that presumably does not ask to be forgiven, by a pre-emptive and unilateral law that simply wounds and walks away, leaving its scar forever. The subject is in this way constituted by an unforgiven and unforgivable wounding, a type of originary circumcision which perhaps means that in asking forgiveness of the other, or in responding to the request for forgiveness of the other, one is always already required to ask forgiveness of oneself, asking it of the other within oneself. One is in any case doing so, as Derrida makes clear, whenever one writes, wounding the other and necessarily asking forgiveness of the other. Asking forgiveness in the first place for having the temerity to write — something he insists upon in spite of his voluminous publications — just as if he were undressing in public, asking to be noticed, and having to apologize for offending the public's sensibilities; but more importantly, asking for forgiveness for the wound caused by the fact that “as soon as I leave a trace I erase the other's singularity, I wound the unicity of the addressee.” Writing is excision, and in writing one circumcises.

*Derrida's Elsewhere* is bound, therefore, by the logic of writing as circumcision, particularly as it pertains to cinematic writing as cutting, editing or excision. Safaa Fathy seems to have realized this, and so 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, something perhaps of their excised unconscious, something that functions within the perspective of a pardon and a healing.

---

#### David Wills

David Wills is Professor of French and English at the University at Albany (SUNY). His published titles include *Prosthesis* and he is translator of Derrida's *Gift of Death*, *Right of Inspection*, and the forthcoming *Counterpath*. A book of essays entitled *Matchbook: Essays in Deconstruction* is also forthcoming. He can be reached at [DWills@uamail.albany.edu](mailto:DWills@uamail.albany.edu).

#### Works Cited:

Bennington, Geoffrey and Jacques Derrida (1993), Jacques Derrida. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, Jacques (1974), *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[Google Scholar](#) [PennText](#)

Derrida, Jacques (1998), *Right of Inspection*. Trans. David Wills. New York: Monacelli Press.

[Google Scholar](#) [PennText](#)

Derrida, Jacques and Bernard Stiegler (2002), *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*. Trans. Jennifer Bajorek. London: Polity Press.

[Google Scholar](#) [PennText](#)

Malabou, Catherine and Jacques Derrida (2004), *Counterpath*. Trans. David Wills. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

[Google Scholar](#) [PennText](#)

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Until the late seventies Derrida refused to be photographed publicly. The first newspaper photograph identified as being his, taken at the *Etats généraux de la philosophie*, was in fact of someone else.

---

Copyright © 2004, David Wills and The Johns Hopkins University Press

#### Additional Information

ISSN	1092-311X
Print ISSN	2572-6633
Launched on MUSE	2004-03-08

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

[Accept](#)