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## 5 Faces of Derrida

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**Bent Sørensen (ed.)  
Camelia Elias – Steen Ledet Christiansen  
Søren Hattesen Balle**

## **5 Faces of Derrida**

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## Introduction: Facing Derrida?

The present publication springs out of an event held in the English Department at Aalborg University on October 18, 2004 as a combined lecture session and film screening. The event had been planned several months ahead and was initially sparked by the fact that several scholars at the Department were interested in applying Derrida's thinking to cultural, literary and media studies practices. When Kirby Dick and Amy Kofman Ziering's movie *Derrida* appeared in 2002, we thought a screening of this film would make the perfect focal point for a series of mini-lectures, framing in four different ways the face of Derrida as presented in the movie. We therefore titled the event, and this publication, *5 Faces of Derrida*, with all the attendant punning implications and associations to, for example, Matei Calinescu's well-known book *Five Faces of Modernity*, or more remotely William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* or Antoine Compagnon's *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*.

Of course, with Jacques Derrida's death on October 8, 2004 the event by necessity took on other aspects than the initially planned ones, and the presenters were forced to decide their positions *vis-à-vis* the desire to mourn and eulogise the passing of the person whose biography we all to some extent dealt with in our papers. The final, precarious balance we struck between eulogy and critique can be gauged from the papers in this short book, but at the time of the event caused us no small unease. The rapid decision to publish the papers as soon as possible can of course also not be said to be uninfluenced by Derrida's death and the flurry of interest in his work and legacy world-wide.

The four papers in the first part of the book offer four different takes on the relationship between *bios* and *graphein* in the case of Derrida and his oeuvre. In the original event these papers represented four faces of Derrida, and since we cannot present the film, let alone

another un-mediated Derridean face, as the fifth instalment of this publication, we have had to create another text to represent the final face. This text is in the form of a virtual round (or more properly, pentagonal) table, where the conversation is initiated by five sets of written questions posed by the editor and circulated among the presenters. Their answers, composed especially for the publication of this book, have then been collated and arranged to create as much dialogism and textual play as possible. In case anyone was wondering who occupies the final face of the pentagonal table, since we were only four presenters, the obvious answer is that that occupant is a spectral Derridean presence, referred to constantly via his writings, his life as it intersected with ours, and the faces he presented in Dick and Ziering's movie.

As for the four initial papers, they all have their own different genesis and scope. Camelia Elias's paper, "Transmitting (to) Derrida", originates in a chapter of her dissertation *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (Peter Lang, 2004), which reads Gordon Lish's fragmented autobiographical 'novel' *Epigraph* in tandem with Derrida's *The Post Card*. This chapter has appeared in a revised edition as "Framing the Fragment: Epigraphic Writing in Gordon Lish and Jacques Derrida" in *The Oxford Literary Review*, issue 26. The short version Camelia Elias has put together for *5 Faces of Derrida* is only concerned with the notions of transmission in the philosophical and private discourses framing Derrida's *The Post Card*, but the intricacies involved in untangling these discourses and their historical and present, biographical implications are still formidable. Derrida is shown to engage playfully in double-talk, referring simultaneously to dialogues between Plato and Socrates and representations in postcards of these figures and their respective roles, and referring also to his own postal affair with a mysterious other correspondent and telephone dialogue partner.

Bent Sørensen's paper "Forgiving Derrida for Dying" is a personal essay, detailing some of his spectral memoirs of Jacques Derrida, 9/11 and life in the institutions, originally written long before Derrida's death, for the book *Culture, Media, Theory, Practice:*

*Perspectives*, edited by Ben Dorfman (Aalborg University Press, 2004). The present short version frames the movie *Derrida* in several senses, ultimately reversing the movie's alternative title 'Chasing Derrida' into 'Derrida Chasing (Me)'. Derrida's haunting of Sørensen's autobiography is told through a number of anecdotes about the multiple personae Derrida embodies in the imagination of his audience. The theme and title of this paper naturally forced Sørensen into careful reflections on the appropriateness of giving the paper so shortly after Derrida's death, but he decided to proceed without many alterations, letting the paper stand as an example of a cultural analysis of how spectrality and haunting works in the case, not only of public figures such as Derrida, but also academics working in the field of cultural studies.

Steen L. Christiansen's paper, "Why I Have Never Seen Derrida" focuses more specifically on the film *Derrida*, and was indeed written especially for this occasion. In the paper Christiansen uses the tools of film studies to situate the film as documentary and biography and shows how the film never succeeds, nor possibly could succeed, in capturing the signifier behind the many representations it delivers of 'Derrida'. The paper suggests that the extreme mundanity of many of the acts and interactions of Derrida, depicted in the film, humanizes Derrida, yet simultaneously estranges us from his person.

Søren H. Balle's paper, "On Derrida's Difficulty (of Telling Stories of His Life), or How to Appreciate Derrida as a Late Romantic" (written for the event and extensively revised for this volume), engages with the Romantic tradition Derrida implicitly situates himself in (as a writer/artist) and challenges philosophically. Balle's paper demonstrates that in the film (as well as in several of his writings) Derrida is letting slip claims that allow us to view him as perhaps the last Romantic in Europe. It is not least Derrida's difficulty /ies that tip us off to these positions, and particularly the difficulty of Derrida's resisting persona, depicted in the film through his insistence on hesitation and evasion of personal matters, forces a portrayal of him as a Romantic genius.



The four papers can be read individually, but it is the hope of the editor and the other authors that they will be enriched by the presence of the fifth text in the book, “5 Faces of Derrida, a Dialogue”. The themes covered by the questions posed to spark off the dialogue are self-reflexive in the sense that they strike chords that also resonate in the four papers, but they are also particularly directed towards a discussion of the film and its engagement with Derridean themes. The cluster of 5 (what else?) dialogue themes consists of “Framing”, “Transmission”, “Faces”, “*L’amour ou La mort?*” and “Archives”. The reader of Derrida’s texts will instantly recognise most of these items as mainstays of Derridean philosophy and analysis, but one needs to turn to the movie to understand their particular currency in this connection. Derrida engages with all of these themes, both theoretically in his discourse, but also performatively in the acts we witness him performing in the course of the filmed events. Certainly, the movie makes a lasting impression on the viewer who finds it difficult to think of Derrida’s texts and philosophical points without picturing him struggling with expressing them in the images created by the film.

The authors and the editor thank the film makers for giving us the opportunity of framing their work with our words. We remember Derrida the better for it, and we remember Derrida always in our daily teaching and writing, perhaps more now than before his remediation as *Derrida* in 2002, and ultimate re-textualization on October 8th, 2004.

Jacques Derrida – *in memoriam*  
January 2005  
Bent Sørensen (editor)

## Transmitting (to) Derrida

*Camelia Elias*

Telecommunication involves a movement of transmission, film theorists inform us (Dienst) and they remind us of Jean Luc Godard and Derrida's metaphors of the postcard. As Erin Manning points out, following Richard Dienst, "Godard compares television and film to the sending of 25 postcards per second", while Derrida, on the other hand, "evokes the postcard as a metaphor for a culture which is 'cast as an immense number of postal transmissions, each stamped by authorities and tradition'" (1998: [http](#)).

Writing obituaries is also an act of transmission. Sending postcards from the dead, as it were. And as is the case with postcards, the writing of obituaries has a certain economy. I read such posted lines as Jon Lebkowsky's on his weblog: "that difficult man, Jacques Derrida, has died. Derrida practised direct transmission of the zen of deconstruction. Or perhaps not" (Lebkowsky, 2004: [http](#)).

Yes, perhaps not, and yet. The postcard, according to Derrida, occupies a position between a sender and an addressee and is dependent on the system that sends it. The postcard is a question of spacing where communication has the potential to take place, or not to take place. I emphasize the idea of potentiality here, insofar as we all know that postcards are dependent on a number of 'economical texts', as Derrida puts it, that ensures their transmissibility. It may be that postcards have a message, an image, or a sender's signature, but if they don't have an address or a stamp, they won't get anywhere. So what interests Derrida is the event in which postcards get lost, or they never arrive. The words that never arrive are thus rendered unreliable. And this is where Zen comes in. According to the Zen masters, words are unreliable, they can construe obstacles defamiliarizing habitual thinking, thus creating a sense of estrangement and anxiety.

Some of these obstacles in the way of transmission are discussed by Derrida in his celebrated book, *The Post Card*. The transmission of philosophy, writing, messages of all kinds, is mediated by the metaphor of the postcard or the figure of the telephone. The book's first part entitled "Envois" features a writer's written discourse in the form of postcards which are being sent to a beloved. But while all the postcards have the same image, the writing on them differs insofar as it offers both an analysis of the image as well as thoughts on the act of transmission. The postcards are all based on one postcard that Derrida's writer has found which depicts Plato and Socrates in an inverse order, with Plato taking Socrates' place, Socrates writing, which we know he never did, and Plato dictating to Socrates, which we know he never did. What fascinates Derrida's writer is the fact that Socrates seems to have been 'mistaken' with Plato. Although Plato made it known that Socrates opposed writing, in the postcard that Derrida has found, Socrates writes. Portrayed by one Matthew Paris – a 13th century artist whose drawing appeared on the frontispiece of a fortune-telling book entitled *Prognostica Socratis Basilei* – Socrates, bent over a desk, takes dictations from Plato.

Derrida's arguments in *The Post Card* orbit around the implication of this reversal: what used to be thought of as the subject (Socrates – S) of the entire western metaphysics is replaced by the predicate (Plato – P). In spite of the fact that Plato's writing has always been the vehicle for Socrates' ideas, Derrida's writer ponders the question: what is the difference between Socrates and Plato, between subject and predicate? And does that difference have any consequence for transmission: who transmits what to whom? It is evident that since Socrates never wrote, he could not possibly be a subject in himself. Yet Socrates was a subject, but he was Plato's written subject. Thus, Socrates is according to Plato. Socrates is a subject with a mask and no name. Socrates is in effect Plato's as if construction. As the title of the first part also indicates, "Envois" conjures up several connotations: sending, voice, invoice, "to send oneself someone", and possession. All these words emphasize potentials and probabilities. This suggests that the collection of

postcards constitutes an assembly of seemingly incoherent events, going to and fro between various concerns with a philosophical tradition passed down to us from Socrates via Plato: subject/predicate; writing; reading; love mediated by writing/reading; love mediated by the telephone; writing lost/writing found. The point that Derrida makes from the outset is that the reversal of the two philosophers' position violates our idea of philosophy. The postcard violates philosophy's desire to communicate a message passed down to us in the form of an eternal truth. While the truth can transcend time and space, the postcard cannot. The postcard is dependent on circumstance, it relates to time and space. While much of philosophy has been received through the now official channel of Plato and Socrates, a postcard circulates out in the open, it is not private and everybody can read it, or misread it. In other words, the circumstance of the postcard is to transmit not just the message but also whatever else supplements it. Circumstance, then, influences any one truth, it interrupts the flow, and it challenges truth's claim to authority.

Appropriately, then, Derrida begins *The Post Card* not with declarative sentences but with a hypothesis: "You might read these envois as a preface to a book that I have not written", thus reminding us of the writing practice that takes place at the margins, circumscribed by quotation marks: prefaces, epigraphs, first sentences, titles, or signatures. Hypotheses of this kind enforce a specific performative quality in the text, as they always involve intent, addressed, not so much to the writer himself to write a book, but to the reader to read the book which was never written. Derrida's 'instead of preface' can therefore be read as an epigraph to the whole work which divides itself in three interrelated parts mediated by an investigation into the workings of psychoanalysis and postal service. The pleasure principle (PP) is mediated through the writing of postcards, or "Envois", which are then entrusted to the post office. Derrida is, however, not concerned with the situation in which the postcards or letters arrive, but with what happens when they get lost, as they say, in the mail. The potential to lose writing is developed by Derrida as a tripartite relation, sending/receiving/returning, which inscribes itself within a

circuit governed by the “Postal Principle” (pp) operating with another set of ideas, or orders: thesis/athesis/hypothesis. (Re)writing the lost postcards, in terms of writing from memory, or revising by hypothesizing, triggers a special pleasure, especially when deliberations on the new contents of the postcards end up in a decision to talk about them on the telephone. The telephone is the athesis of the postcard’s thesis.

Derrida’s writer of postcards to his beloved expresses all sorts of anxieties about space. The inverted space between Plato and Socrates, the space between sender and addressee, yet entangled in his own arguments, the writer decides to pick up the phone and explain. The postcard is a medium with a double potential: to transmit a message – if the card arrives at its destination – and to interrupt it – if the card never reaches its addressee. Conversely, a telephonic message is dependent on a double determination on the part of the receiver: to answer the telephone or not. The first case involves an immediacy of the situation – if one answers, the interlocutor ‘talks back’ – and the second case represents an economy of the situation – if one does not answer, the telephone would still ‘ring a bell’. Elsewhere, in his essay “Ulysses Gramophone”, Derrida favours the telephone for its intertextual potential: “Before the act or the word, the telephone. In the beginning was the telephone. We can hear the telephone constantly ringing, this *coup de téléphone* which plays on figures that are apparently random, but about which there is so much to say” (270).

The picture cards sent to the beloved depicting the impersonation Plato-in-Socrates/Socrates-in-Plato as a moment of imposture, mirror the writer’s own concern with what grounds the transmission of a disguised philosophy. Here, the figure of the telephone is employed as a mediator between ‘as if’ written messages and their “scrambled” oral form. Socrates’s ‘spoken’ language, as it were, is always dubious, fleeting, and needs to be deciphered in writing. The instance of the oral versus writing is furthermore mirrored in the writer’s relationship to his beloved: while contact is established by the sending of postcards, whenever the beloved has something to say, it is said on the telephone. The time and space of communication is, however, divided

in equal measures: when the writer is not writing, he is on the phone. Thus, sending postcards and being on the phone initiates, on the one hand, a concern with the emission of words as fragments on the threshold of something oracular, linking hypothetical events, yet always on the verge of happening. On the other hand, emitted words are seen as an emblem of oral signification. “The chance of the telephone – never lose an opportunity – it gives us back our voice” (10) expresses an interest in time that is calculated and time that is unpredictable.

For Derrida, moreover, voice is linked to potentiality, and potentiality names the imaginary: “the idea that you might ‘call’ me and that I might not answer overwhelms me. All this telephone between us” (41). Beyond the pleasure principle as a mediated form by the post, sending is a subject with a double configuration always both internal and external to other configurations of past and future texts, original and potential states, textual and hermeneutic structures. When the message is original, it has a textual structure; when the message is potential, it has a hermeneutic structure. What interests Derrida is ultimately to localize the subject of the beyond, beyond the beyond as it were. This subject is not a principle, but a desire desiring desire. As such, the desiring desire is always engaged in arriving, always on the threshold, always in the mail. I conclude here with one of Derrida’s postcards:

I arrive now

Forgot again just now the time difference [*décalage horaire*], doubtless because I knew that you would not be alone. You can imagine (I would like us to read it together, losing ourselves in it) the immense *carte* of the communications called “immediate” (the telephone, etc., call it telepathy) across the distance and network of “time differences” (all the red points that light up at the same time on our map of Europe). [...] Between writing with a pen, or speaking on the telephone, what a difference. That is the word. How well I know the system of objections, but they do not hold, in sum do not go far enough. You can see clearly that S. is telephoning and behind the other one is whispering.

And Freud has plugged his line into the answering machine of the *Philebus* or the *Symposium*. The American operator interrupts and scrambles: Freud is not paying enough, is not putting enough *quarters* into the machine. (30–31)

The telephone is thus seen as a metaphor of the postcard. By the same token, the quoted passage invites the assumption that writing is a metaphor of speech, the subject is a metaphor of the predicate, Plato is a metaphor of Socrates, the lover is a metaphor of the beloved, and time is a metaphor of space. Here Derrida pushes his deconstructive writing project in the direction of making deconstruction itself take the place of the reader. Engaging deconstruction on its own meta-course means engaging the reader in the figurative naming of that which has no name. That is, when deconstruction becomes the reader, the reader cancels his own ghost, and thus reads *in nihilo veritas*.

The five faces of Derrida begin here with transmission. And if we want transmission, we are all responsible for paying, for sending, for arriving, for talking things to death, for dying...

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## Forgiving Derrida for Dying...

A personal narrative – framed by a topical preface and a commentary in another voice

*Bent Sørensen*

“Forgiving Derrida for Dying” is a short personal essay, detailing some of my spectral memoirs of Jacques Derrida, 9/11 and life in the institutions. Derrida’s haunting of my autobiography is told through a number of anecdotes about the multiple personae Derrida embodies in the imagination of his audience. This paper was given at an event which the organizers chose to call *5 Faces of Derrida*, because it featured four short papers and a screening of the movie *Derrida*. There was some debate as to the appropriateness of the title, not least since it could be argued that each paper presented more than one face of our protagonist. Other titles could be proposed, including *Framing Derrida*. Certainly my paper frames the movie *Derrida* in several senses, ultimately reversing the movie’s alternative title *Chasing Derrida* into *Derrida Chasing (Me)*. Ultimately, perhaps, the event should just have gone under the name *4 Short Papers and a Film...*

This was an interesting occasion to participate in, not least because it was scheduled to take place less than two weeks after Derrida’s death – a coincidence entirely beyond the organizers’ control. As always the sudden need to strike a balance between the topical and the *sub species aeternae* perspective made things more difficult. In this case the difficulty translated itself into problems with beginnings. On Friday, October 8, 2004 Derrida finally became a text... Of course this was not the appropriate way to begin, but the urge to begin this way was too strong to pass up the opportunity. Let me begin again: On Friday, October 8, 2004 Derrida finally became a text – but then Derrida was always already a text, as any student of his life’s work in deconstruction knows. But maybe, at least, Friday the



8th marked a moment at which Derrida became nothing outside text in a fashion which had not previously been as clear as it now was. The question of what remains of Derrida is certainly one that the movie raises on several occasions, not least in its discussion of the Derrida archives, and Derrida's jokes at the inauguration of the facility housing the 100 grey boxes holding his remains.

It was crucial, I thought, not to speak exclusively in a mode limited by the event's inevitable status of a memorial occasion. It was proper as always to speak in a slippery manner about Derrida's life and text, so I proposed to go forward with a mixture of reverence and irreverence in my portrait of Derrida – or my *autobiography* as Derrida would be quick to remind me that this text inevitably would be, regardless of any pretence on my part to write his *bios*. Perhaps the best tribute I could possibly produce would be to proceed in playful derivative fashion and coin the term *reverance* – spelled, of course, with an *a* – to designate the tonality for the discourses to follow...

1.

On the morning of September 11, 2001 my wife and I were asleep in our dingy B&B in midtown Manhattan. We were rudely awakened by a loud, heart-stopping thud as something fell out of the broom closet on the corridor directly outside our door. "What the fuck was that?" were the immortal words I saw fit to utter as the first of many inquiring, cursing and doubtful words spoken on that day. Shortly after the interruption of our sleep I had progressed to my morning shower, one of many ritual actions performed almost mechanically every morning. In preparation for our going up to Columbia U., my wife performed another ritual, recurring act: she switched on the TV, regularly tuned in to NY1, a local news station, chiefly of use because they bring an accurate weather report every ten minutes around the clock. On the news that morning, it transpired, was one item, and one item only. No weather updates were forthcoming, either. My wife called me, trying to drown out the noise of the shower: "There is something wrong with one of the towers!" As I re-entered the

bedroom, I saw on the screen that that indeed was a bit of an understatement.

As the morning unravelled and NY1 and other news channels filled us in on what was actually happening, I found myself becoming more and more paralysed with anxiety. There was of course nothing we could do: there were planes in the air intent on hostile acts, seemingly directed at random against things American, and there was no way we could dissociate ourselves from that despite the fact that none of us were American or particularly sympathetic to things American, with the possible exceptions of Starbucks, Barnes & Noble and The Metropolitan Opera.

Later in the day we decided to switch off the TV, which by now had started its pattern of repetitive showing of clips that had been too horrible to grasp the first few times we had viewed them, but which now seemed merely a nuisance in their lack of new information about what had happened or was about to happen. We decided to brave the streets instead. Outside it was a crisp and rather nice day. The shops on Broadway were open, Starbucks was crowded and there was nothing much unusual going on on the sidewalks, except that people would frequently crane their necks and look towards the south. Nothing was actually visible in that direction, not even the plume of smoke that we had stared at on TV. The local buildings were simply blocking the view of anything untoward appearing down there. The sounds of New York were also familiar, the only noticeable difference being more sirens than usual.

We didn't talk to anyone, but it seemed that there were more instances of strangers having conversations than you'd normally see in shops and restaurants. That day people were trying very hard to behave better than normal, and indeed it was observed in the weeks to come in most of the media how New Yorkers were no longer rude to one another in public. That they took it out on one another in private, as a whole city and a whole world slid into post-traumatic stress, was evident from the programming which replaced the usual news, sports, weather cycle on stations such as NY1. More and more call-in shows appeared on the air, usually featuring people crying, expressing a

sense of loss and bewilderment at the events and their significance, and often boiling over with repressed aggressions against the terrorists, Islam in general, and ultimately all their fellow human beings, including their nearest family and kin, who, unlike the terrorists, were within reach.

In the days after 9/11 we were struck by the strange new public displays of emotion surrounding us. People cried at every possible turn: on the air, at concerts, in classes and at lectures, on the streets in front of the thousands of improvised memorials for the lost and dead loved ones. We felt out of place, because we didn't cry, because we were no longer hysterical. When Jacques Derrida came to NYU the following week to give classes there with Avital Ronell, and to Columbia to speak about death and forgiveness, we were taken aback when the American students would read into his already prepared lectures and readings, emotions and comments related to the recent local events. When Derrida talked about forgiving the Holocaust, he was met with no critical questions by supposedly some of the most intelligent students at NYU. The only responses that day were strangely schizophrenic: One girl would giggle loudly, almost in a snorting fashion, every time Derrida referred to Kant by name. The one intelligible verbal response when Ronell asked the class for questions was another girl stating: "I'm crying." When asked to repeat what she had said (I suppose the response was so irregular that neither Derrida nor Ronell could quite believe what they had heard), she elaborated: "I'm crying – it's so emotional". I felt sick and angry at such a monumental missing of the point Derrida had been trying to make: that forgiveness is only possible in the face of the unforgivable. If any relevance to the events of 911 were to be found in Derrida's painstakingly prepared and philologically researched analysis (he certainly didn't make any overt parallels), it seemed to me that it would be that America would have to at some point collectively forgive the terrorists. No such point could, however, be voiced at that time, in New York, and barely has, even at this late stage, anywhere.

When Derrida gave a reading from *The Work of Mourning*, his volume of eulogies to departed friends and associates, a few days later

in a jam-packed auditorium at Columbia, there were not many questions about the pantheon of French, German and American friends and philosophers Derrida had written about in that book. One question, though, stands out vividly in my memory. A woman in her forties got up and confessed: “My mother died very recently. Can you say anything that can help me understand that event?” I was myself mortified. Possibly the greatest philosopher alive was reduced to the role of a radio-psychologist, being asked to give advice on coping and getting on with life. Derrida seemed to take it in his stride and his answer was no different than it would have been to an academic question, at least not in tone and *politesse*. The image of Derrida cast as the wise white-haired father/philosopher/wizard figure remains with me.

In the months to follow the events of 9/11 continued to haunt me through TV screens, dreams, discussions and conversations with friends and strangers, but most eerily through the presence of the spectre of Jacques Derrida on the margins of my life. Recently, when I started this narrative, I told my wife half-jokingly that I was about to write my memoirs of Derrida, which seemed appropriate now that friends had informed us that he was in the last stages of terminal pancreatic cancer. Her response surprised me: “But you have no relationship with Derrida!” In fact, Derrida’s presence had on several occasions been quite palpable in our lives, both before New York, and after we returned to tranquil Denmark at the end of the year 2001.

My first encounter with Derrida was when he was an honoured guest at a conference in May 2001 in Kolding, where our friend and colleague, Roy Sellars, a self-avowed “Derrida groupie”, had gathered 40 scholars for a two-day event wholly dedicated to “Glossing *Glas*”, as the conference was titled. Here I first heard Derrida “speak as a woman”, as one fellow conference participant commented on Derrida’s tendency toward the falsetto when making a particularly exquisite point of dialectic subtlety (and often infinite self-evidence). During the final session of the symposium Derrida answered a number of questions posed to him in advance by the organizers. Derrida spoke about the heteroglossia he had felt impelled to practice ever since his

first attempt to write the two columns of *Glas*. He said: “I have always been since then compelled to write in more than one voice. I have a number of texts which are unavoidably haunted by a multiplicity of places and voices, and marked – and the sexual difference is essential – by always at least one feminine voice. I can quote a number of texts, for instance *La Verité En Peinture*, and all the time all these characters and signatures involved one or more than one feminine voice”.

This claim struck me as wonderfully paradoxical. The previous day Derrida had responded to some of the many papers in honour of him, but the conference as a whole had been somewhat marred by the poor acoustics of the Hall at Koldinghus Castle where the event took place. Most of us had trouble hearing everything, but for Derrida himself it must have been nearly impossible to distinguish anything, since he was at the time already rather deaf. This had not been particularly apparent to anybody until the moment when Sarah Wood, one of the panellists, brought up the name of Derrida’s old friend and debating partner Paul de Man, and Derrida was quite incapable of catching the reference. Sarah Wood repeated the familiar name three or four times at increasing volume, until the hall was resounding with those quasi-French syllables. Everyone but Derrida had by now understood Wood’s invocation. Finally she gave up communicating to Derrida what her point had been, and the conference lumbered on. Derrida who spoke routinely in “one or more feminine voices” was incapable of hearing one of the few female voices present at the conference.

Such somewhat facile observations were to come back to haunt myself at a later stage, but rather amused me at the time. I was reminded of an analysis I had written of Derrida at another conference speaking about being spoken about, “as if dead” (not “deaf”). The proceedings had later appeared under the title *Applying: To Derrida*, and one contribution in particular had explored the playful multiplicity of meanings to be teased out of that title. I quote a modest portion of the article in question: “Applied Derrida. Derrida applied. Apply Derrida. Derrida, apply. The application of Derrida. Apply Derrida

sparingly, liberally, gently, regularly (to the affected parts). A brief application of Derrida soon brought about considerable improvements” (Bennington, 1996: 1). This example of Derrida-fetishism was in itself disturbing, but easily topped by the ensuing twisting of Derrida’s proper name into a verb: “to derrida”, designating a new activity synonymous with application, interpretation, etc.

The affable, but somewhat deaf Derrida of the “Glossing *Glas*” conference was a different entity than the post 9/11 Derrida I had met in New York. In September there was no urge to laugh at his aural blind spots, no urge to lay the blame for fetishistic worship of his persona at his own feet. The tables were turned by the terrorist intervention into all our lives, and Derrida who spoke as a woman, yet could not hear one speak, was now instead becoming a Gandalf-like focal point for people’s sorrow and desire to mourn their dead and the passing of innocence they experienced inside themselves, and which extraverted itself as a desire in everybody to also have experienced the loss of a near and dear one in the tragic event of the World Trade Center collapse – and thus to “share” (a particularly American desire). The persona of this new Derrida was not to be ridiculed, but rather associated itself inextricably with sorrow, loss and mourning, also in my own psyche.

But, not surprisingly, the old Derrida came back to haunt me in the months after our return to Denmark. His voice, feminine or not, had in fact quite literally been entrusted to me to transcribe by Roy Sellars, a task to which I had foolishly acquiesced shortly after the symposium in Kolding. While in New York I had done none of the work of transcribing Derrida’s lecture, being as it were replenished almost daily by new Derrida impressions of a far more pertinent nature. Unwittingly to myself the miasma of 9/11 intervened in my perception of Derrida and made it traumatic to return to the fetish of the old Derrida which manifested itself as a present object in the shape of a large number of poor quality cassette tapes waiting for me to listen to and transcribe. The specific locus of my traumatic response was to be found in the unapproachable status of the pile of cassette tapes with Derrida on them. At the end of 8 months I was forced to

acknowledge defeat. I had to resign from the task as recorder of Derrida's words, yet from the jaws of that defeat I managed to snatch a small victory. With the help of my wife I confronted the mouth of Derrida, and recorded 17 pages of his final presentation, a portion of which I have quoted above. The tapes were atrocious, the discourse of Derrida not always inspiring, nor eloquent, yet the accomplishment of the work was reward in itself, and marked the beginning of a return from trauma for me. The Gandalfian Derrida mystique receded and ironic positions again surfaced from under emotional detritus and became almost as tenable as before.

Our later dealings with Derrida have been more sporadic, but no less guilt accompanied. In 2003 my wife and I spent 3 months in Portugal, researching and writing. While we were in Lisbon Derrida came to nearby Coimbra to speak on sovereignty. We didn't go. The Derrida movie we are about to see played one night in Lisbon. We didn't go. The Coimbra event was held entirely in French; the Derrida movie featured interviews reportedly carried out in abysmal French. Thus a convenient alibi presented itself in the form of my notorious francophobia, and this justified to myself our absence from these Derridean appliances. When news then reached us in roundabout fashions from Avital Ronell (who confessed that she had moved temporarily to France to be near her "Master", and to perform "Californian healing rituals" upon him), and more final sounding bulletins from Mark C. Taylor, that Derrida was dying and might never appear at another conference, we were of course instantly guilt ridden and remorseful that we had not gone to see him in Coimbra. What if we had indeed missed the "Last Chance to See", as William Burroughs once billed one of his lecture tours? Were we not at least partially culpable in bringing about the death of Derrida? Were we not now facing the unbearable onus of forgiving Derrida for dying – for dying on us? All the derision of derridaing once more returned spectrally to haunt our dreams.

2.

The form of the preceding narrative is typical of that of the so-called personal essay – filled with asides, digressions, whimsy, apparently random associations, chronological instabilities manifested in flashbacks and flashforwards from an ontologically unstable now plane, as well as ontological flickerings caused by the alternation between first person singular and first person plural pronouns: “I” and “we”. The tone is equally, if not more, in flux between apparently sincere evaluation and occasionally remorseful reflections, and wholly sarcastic, almost slanderous, characterizations of several of the real-life characters referred to and analysed in the piece. The focal character, “Jacques Derrida”, is particularly prone to this fluctuating valorization – as witnessed by the extremes of his being derided as a vain old chauvinist, while only a few breaths earlier being called the greatest living philosopher in the world. The derision Derrida is being exposed to is of course partly motivated by the same punning energy Derrida’s own deconstructive philosophy and language is famous for subjecting both his own writing and his own name to. It can therefore be seen as a writing back to Derrida, an oblique attempt at punishing Derrida for his sins of spurious etymological practices, free association and false causality – or as an awkward backhanded homage to Derrida’s freshening up of the language in which we can now discourse about sovereignty, capital punishment and forgiveness without recourse to cheap sentimentality and emotion.

Throughout the account meanderingly set forth by the narrator, the spectres of Derrida as Master, yet not always, and only, the narrator’s Master, continue to haunt the text and its narration. The spectrality of “Derrida” is strangely undercut by, yet also highlighted by the ‘real’ Derrida’s perceived position as dying, yet undead; perceptive, yet deaf; feminine, yet aurally phallogocentric; himself, yet othered as an icon transformed by an eager audience into an array of fetishistic appliances and figures of the imagination. This sequence can be read as pay-back for Derrida’s own spectral treatment and hauntings of the scenes of death of so many of his friends and fellow critical intellectuals. His persistent writing “on the death of” may in



some way have invited this mixture of derision and derridaing of his own persona as the embodiment of the epitaphic voice in philosophy.

Since ultimately there is no theme in the narrative which has not been dealt with extensively in Derrida's own writing, be it haunting and spectrality; violence, trauma, guilt and shame, confession and forgiveness; or practice, application and theory, it is arguable that the entire piece is circumscribed by Derrida's thinking and that Derrida countersigns the narrative both in content, style and method. Even such terminology is of course completely Derridean, which renders the essay a specimen of meta-deconstructive discourse, struggling against the circumfession of deconstruction, yet failing to emerge uncircumcised by its method and language. Only in the aporia created by its mediation between irony and post-ironic sincerity and therefore finally unreadable enunciation position is the narrative able to sign itself into its own space, forgive Derrida for (not) dying, and (possibly) forgive itself for its self-indulgence.

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All cultural analysis creates and manifests such aporias. The objects of cultural analysis are decontextualised, reified and fetishized by the analytical language. If, on the other hand, the analyst attempts to write subjectively and injects him or herself into the text, the contagion of the spectral process migrates via the personal tone into the analyst's personal life and may spread virally in a feedback loop from and to his or her words and life. This spectrality often mars the life of the cultural analyst to an extent where all events are seen as fodder for yet more cultural analysis. The only escape is to become acculturated, to be culturally analysed, to become haunted by the spectres of culturality, to be dispossessed of your personal identity in the process of being infected by a cultural one, to become a cultural text, readable by other potential victims of cultural analysis. The cure is also the malaise itself: To talk, write and act culturally and ultimately to be willing to forgive culture (and even forgive oneself) and to beg others' cultural pardon.

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## Why I Have Never Seen Derrida

*Steen Ledet Christiansen*

It seems peculiar, but perhaps a form of poetic justice, that a film about the one person who has been so emphatically opposed to the metaphysics of presence, is so dependent on this very thing. Seeing Derrida puttering around his home, eating breakfast and smoking his pipe certainly disarms the myth of the outlaw which has formed around him. We may be comfortably disappointed when we see Derrida participate in family dinners without arguing that it is impossible to give a dinner, since the transaction disappears in the circle of exchange. The film wavers awkwardly between the desire to celebrate the myth of Derrida, following him when a new Derrida archive is inaugurated, and yet also wanting to deflate the very same myth. Why else choose to show him doing banal, everyday things? In the end, what we see on the screen is not really Derrida, neither as an academic outlaw, nor as a family person. This brief paper will focus on the peculiar impossibility of showing Derrida.

Film, as a medium, is often regarded as the closest to an unmediated reality we can get. The imprint on the celluloid or images points to the things and people “having been there” in Roland Barthes’s words on the photograph (Barthes 1981: 76). André Bazin argues for a certain transparency and immediacy of the images in relation to reality. Cinema can completely satisfy our appetite for illusion, and it can do so in a very specific way, namely by creating a reproduction where nobody plays a part, there is no artist to render, or interpret, what we see, everything is reproduced mechanically and automatically without any interference from an artist (Bazin, 1945: 197). This means that we see reality as it really is, that we are not ‘cheated’ by any symbolic codes or elements.

We owe all this to one specific thing: the camera and its objective lens. The invention of the camera means, for Bazin, that all of a sudden there is no intervening between the originating object and its reproduction, only a mechanical, nonliving agent. This means that the world of the film is formed automatically, with no 'creative intervention' as he calls it. No longer is there a psychological dimension to the image, it is pure and direct (197–198).

This creates an objective production of reality, and because of this our psychology or our interpretation of the cinematic image becomes radically different. We are forced to accept it as real, since the camera is an objective observer. Therefore, no matter how critical we might be we are forced to acknowledge that what we see is the factual existence of nature reproduced before us, or in fact re-presented, presented again. For Bazin, this actually creates a "transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction" (198). In other words, the image is as true as reality. The film apparatus is an innovation which does not truly mediate but instead simply records events with no intervention.

There are two problems with this; the problem of iterability and the problem of the frame. First, iterability or repetition. While the cinematic image promises an unmediated, immediate presence, we must realize that this presence is impossible because the images can be repeated in the absence of Derrida. Although we 'see' Derrida on the screen and so believe in his presence, the images can be repeated endlessly which in turn must make us realize that Derrida is exactly not there. The presence of the cinematic image of Derrida inevitably points out that it is not Derrida, Derrida is in fact absent because his image is 'there' on the screen. In a sense, Derrida must be absent in order for the image to work. If we imagine Derrida physically sitting beside us while watching the film, we would be unable to believe in the image as true since we know he cannot be in two places at once. The image, then, can only be true, can only achieve its realistic effect when Derrida is physically absent. The photographic image thus depends upon the absence of the subject.

Second, the frame. Film, by its nature, must frame what it chooses to show. Even Bazin agrees with this, but this choice of framing is itself an ambiguous choice. Not just because of what is chosen to be inside the frame in a political and ideological sense, but also because of the relation to what is outside the frame. If it is not in the frame, it does not exist. This is in many ways the guiding principle of cinematography, yet at the same time what is outside the frame must still exist. While we only see a framed selection of space, any narrative understanding of the film must by its nature depend on a diegetic space which exists precisely outside the frame. As the camera tracks, pans, dollies, or cuts to a different angle we are as spectators reaffirmed in the existence of a larger diegetic space. Yet this space is itself simply another frame which depends on more diegetic space outside it. What is present inside the frame therefore depends on what is outside the frame, which must be by definition absent. There can never be a totality which is in the frame, and so the image in the frame depends on what is absent as much as on what is present. This totality is not just the pure visual understanding of a holistic space, but is also cultural, historical, political, consciousness/desire, conventions, film history, etc which conceivably exist outside the frame yet must always be folded back into the image in order to 'properly' understand it.

It so follows that what we regard as the presence of the image actually depends on the absence of what we believe to be present. Does this result in the impossibility of realism in film? This can perhaps best be answered with a yes and a no. Yes in the political/ideological sense that film is as much a mediation and representation as anything else, there is nothing natural about it. No, in the sense that images are certainly not completely discontinuous with reality. There exists a certain analogical relationship between the photographic image and reality. This relationship is best explained through the supplement. Reality becomes the supplement which enables us to regard the image as realistic. Though what the image shows us is, in fact, radically absent, we continually supplement this absence with our belief in a pre-existing reality. This reality supplement grafts itself to the image and allows us to regard the images as realistic. Curiously, it

is precisely this move which means that it is the existence of the cinematic image, the monocular vision of the Renaissance-perspective, which proves to us that reality exists outside the cinema. This dependency on the image to guarantee reality is precisely Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal.

Documentaries are of course generally seen to have a special relationship to reality and truth, particularly as they are seen not to depend on aesthetic choices, nor to enforce a particular narrative on the events. The problem with such documentaries is the claim to truth which they must make in order to exist as documentaries; one would hardly be interested in a documentary which makes no claim to truth and which continually denies its own authority. Such a claim to truth inevitably frames the subject, creating new areas to explore and so attempts to make that area meaningful; which often comes down to enforcing *one* meaning of the subject examined. This is certainly no less so in biographical studies. The film makers of *Derrida the Movie* are painfully aware of this unsolvable problem, as is Derrida himself. The constant references to the framing and distortion of reality which the cameras and the situation imposes are annoying, at least to me, because they interfere with the conventions of documentary film making, which is of course precisely why they are there.

Yet a cinematic study of one person comes very close to fetishism: an aspect of film making which has been recognized for a long time. Cinematic practices such as the close-up create fetishistic instances within the narrative, something often exploited or employed in most films. Derrida is clearly the fetish of this film and is so in a double sense. The attraction to such a documentary is of course based on the iconic status of Derrida. Yet while we see the film because of the status of Derrida we also see it with a desire to see something which we do not know; we wish to see the 'real' Derrida, the person behind the icon.

This desire is peculiarly split between the two 'versions' of Derrida. It is the iconic Derrida which signs the film in order to give the film authority. Signing the film in this figurative way is a way to ensure the presence of Derrida; it becomes a promise that seeing this

film one will have seen Derrida. However, this is problematic because the signature exists only as the absence of the signer; if the signer were present there would be no reason to sign the utterance or text. Furthermore, the one who signs the film clearly cannot be within the film at the same time. We return, once again, to the absence of what we believe is present in the image and the framing which divides what is 'inside' the image and what is 'outside'.

The signer of the film is the textual Derrida, it is the iconic Derrida. Yet this iconic status is disrupted because what he is known for – philosophy and deconstruction – is peculiarly absent compared to the presence of him eating breakfast, smoking his pipe, learning he has the same dress-code as Hugh Hefner. Even the passages from his books are read by another. The film tries to show the 'real' Derrida, but this 'real' can only be spoken in quotation marks because the 'real' Derrida is both absent in no less than two senses; he is absent as the signer of the text because it is the nature of the signature to detach itself from the unique, singular moment, in order to be iterable. He is also absent because what authorizes the film must be outside the film in order to authorize it; Derrida must frame himself and so the text doubles back on itself, containing the 'real' Derrida inside, but only by re-marking him, framing him, and so destroys the possibility of seeing Derrida.

The film, then, becomes a trace of Derrida; we know that the trace denies the possibility of "a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself" (Derrida, 2002: 26). Derrida is effaced in the process of the film, since: "The trace is not only the disappearance of the origin – within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin." (Derrida, 1976: 61). Derrida has then both come before the film and will come after, but can never be present in the moment. It seems that we are reduced to a familiar position; we must settle back, to await Derrida.



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## On Derrida's Difficulty (of Telling Stories of His Life) or How to Appreciate Derrida as a Late Romantic

*Søren Hattesen Balle*

Throughout the film *Derrida* (2002) it is worth noticing that Derrida is asked a couple of times to tell about crucial events in his life – how he and his wife first fell in love and traumatic breaks in his life. Without exception he falls awkwardly silent each time, refuses to speak and wards off the interviewer's questions by remarks to the effect that he regards these things as 'very difficult,' 'impossible' or something he 'won't be able' to talk about – especially in front of a camera. This anti-narrative thrust in *Derrida* is interesting because he flaunts it in a biographical film about himself, and not least because the generic conventions of biography have always courted the assumption that it is possible to give a full account of a person's life.<sup>1</sup> Derrida obviously sabotages the biographical intent of the film, yet also affirms it by consenting to its making in the first place.

At the same time Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman's film about Derrida is not an ordinary biographical portrait of him, but rather just as much a filmic meta-biography – that is, a film reflecting on and deconstructing itself as filmic biography. Thus, for instance, it appears to take seriously *en abyme* Geoffrey Bennington's question at a conference at New York University on Derrida and biography, which is included on the DVD version as part of a deleted alternative

1 Cf. "Late in the seventeenth century, John Dryden defined biography neatly as 'the history of particular men's lives.' The name now connotes a relatively full account of a particular person's life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject's activities and experiences" (M. H. Abrams: 1999: 22).

opening, where he asks: “If there were a project for the biography of Jacques Derrida, my question would be: What would it look like *if* it were a biography that tried to take seriously what Derrida had thought?” (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2002, Deleted Scenes: no. 1) In a strange double bind, therefore, Derrida’s deconstruction of biography is deliberately made to participate in the film’s very biographing of him which is somehow allowed to take place nonetheless.

This paper is an attempt to deal with Derrida’s ambivalence towards biographical narrative in *Derrida* and his difficulties with it. But instead of treating this subject as if it constitutes the true biographical content of Derrida’s life in Dick and Ziering Kofman’s film, and as if the latter had thus managed to go Derrida’s deconstruction of biography one better, I would rather suggest that its foregrounding contributes to constructing Derrida *as* a certain persona – namely, as one by whom the borderline between life and (deconstructive) work has always already been deconstructed. Such a construction of Derrida is interesting for a number of reasons, not least because there would then never have been any straightforward way of biographing him. But it is also because in its margins the film frames it by constructions of other personae of Derrida that seem to downplay the highly mediated image of him. In this way, I would propose, the film can be said to present a poetics of Derrida’s biography in its constant (un)making. At the same time, by mimicking Derrida’s deconstruction of biography, the film also reflects on its own unceasing possibility of becoming indistinguishable from the work the life of whose author it nevertheless plays at portraying, and in that process it becomes precisely (de)constructive of and like Derrida.

As I shall argue, Dick and Ziering Kofman’s choice to let Derrida’s deconstructive work constantly interfere with the very act of portraying leads to a sense of belatedness in the film, where its original working title *Chasing Derrida* gains added significance. Not least does the film make a virtue of drawing attention to its always being at one or more removes from its object of biographical portraiture, just as considerable sections from Derrida’s written work

quoted and read aloud by Amy Kofman at strategic turns make the viewer wonder whether they are meant to be forming part of the film's portrait of him, or rather to be functioning – as if by ventriloquism and in advance – as Derrida's portrait, perhaps even his directing, of the directors' poetics of meta-biographing. In the following I shall elaborate in more detail on some of these aspects of the difficulty which biography presents to Derrida in Dick and Ziering Kofman's eponymous film, compounding this difficulty *ad infinitum*.

In order to take last things first, the confusion of the film's biographical portrait of Derrida with Derridean deconstruction seems to extend as far as to its paratextual framework. The cover of the DVD version presents among other inscriptions the title of the film, *Derrida*, which is placed slightly off-centre and in-between reproductions of what looks like a snapshot of three copies of the same moving film strip, image by image representing Derrida looking directly at the camera. The title in itself is quite interesting, as it is doubled in smaller type size as if watched over by its larger counterpart. Or vice versa as if the smaller type size version of the name rather inscribes itself on top of, across, in the shadow of and in-between the letters of the larger version. The doubling of Derrida's name in the title draws attention to the fact that the title is not single. In that sense it is made to match the stills of the moving film strip, in which Derrida's portrait is altered image by image to become either more distinct or verge on utter effacement – due either to the cameraman's focussing or to later photographic editing for the cover design.

In his essay "Signature Event Context", Derrida has written extensively on the iterability of the sign:

[T]here is [...] a force of breaking by virtue of [the sign's] essential iterability; one can always lift a written syntagma from the interlocking chain in which it is caught or given without losing every possibility of functioning, if not every possibility of "communicating," precisely. Eventually, one may recognize other such possibilities in it by inscribing or *grafting* it into other chains. No context can enclose it. Nor can any code. (Derrida, 1982: 317; author's emphasis)

It seems that the cover design quite deliberately draws on Derrida's notion of the iterable sign in order to suggest the non-singularity of what a biographical portrait of him might mean. Viewed in the light of the quote, the grafting of Derrida's name in small type on top of or in the margins of its reproduction in large type may invite a reading where the sign "Derrida" no longer only signifies the name of the person portrayed by the film. We might, for instance, wager the proposition that it also stands for the signature underwriting that body of texts that many readers know by that name. In similar fashion, the titular design of the DVD cover would be legible as the multiple possibilities of characterizing the relationship between the life and work of Derrida, whose difference I have alluded to as one Derrida thinks of as always already deconstructed. The film itself in fact makes it less than certain to which extent the title *Derrida* entitles a biographical portrait or a portrait of his writings. The viewer is routinely brought into serious doubt about this question, especially since biographical portraiture as such breaks down whenever Derrida resists participating in it, or it is replaced by longish readings from his texts or shots from his participation in a conference panel on philosophy and biography. In the latter instances these readings and remarks also seem to function as meta-commentaries on the film's own attempt at biographing Derrida. Kofman's reading of an excerpt from *The Ear of the Other* (1985) is a case in point, as this text's questioning of the borderline between empirical subject and textualized subject reproduces itself in the difficulty of determining what the proper name 'Derrida' of the film title signifies.

Given the inclusion of Derrida's reflections on biography in the film, the doubling of the title on the cover may on a second reading be argued to refer to the inability to tell who is portraying whom, Derrida or the film so named. The small and large type size of its letters and their mutual positioning would then allegorically raise the question of which kind of hierarchical relationship the film suggests is established between itself and its purported subject of portraiture. One might easily characterize their relationship as one where *Derrida* sits reverently at the foot of Derrida reproducing itself in the image of his

thinking. The film seems to bear out such a reading in many respects. The episode where Derrida is asked to talk about the origin of the term deconstruction is indicative of this. Instead of answering the question he inserts a remark foregrounding the artificiality of the interviewing situation in order to denaturalize the film's portrait of him. Similarly, Derrida later on remarks – apropos of Amy Kofman's editing of the film – that it will turn into her “autobiography in a certain way” (Dick and Ziering Kofman, 2002, Scene Selection: no. 14). Thus, the directors' decision to include this footage in the final cut comes to function both as a practical example of what deconstruction is, and, not unimportantly, as a frame within the frame of biographical portraiture that almost authoritatively dictates its very deconstruction.

On the other hand, the relationship might well to some extent be thought of as reversible, so that the deconstruction of biography is not the master's final word about *Derrida*. Among the many remarks made by Derrida a couple refer to his former unwillingness to be painted, photographed or biographed which has been replaced by acceptance and letting go. His inability to avoid what he calls “the fetishization of the author” is presented as his then reason for resisting portraiture (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2002, Interviews: no. 14), whereas his speaking in public, as he did in 1969 participating with other French intellectuals in a defence of the teaching of philosophy in French schools, made him realize that under certain circumstances he could not control his own image, and he decided to let it go.

This relinquishing of control over his own image seems to be figured in those scenes of the film where conventional biographical narrative makes its appearance without being mediated by commentary highlighting its status as just an artificial representation of reality. Ziering Kofman's interview with Derrida's brother, which deals with the theme of Derrida as philosopher and of potential “links” in the family history, is a good example of that. Here it almost seems as if the directors for a moment move the film out from under the authority of Derrida's dictation in order to re-inscribe classical biography. Derrida's difficulty with biographical narrative is forgotten or suspended, and instead we have somebody else, René Derrida,

comfortably seated with his granddaughter on his lap, politely answering Amy Kofman's questions about the intellectual heritage of the Derrida family in the capacity of a supposedly valuable biographical character witness.

Yet, even in this instance the influence of Derrida's work haunts *Derrida's* attempt at an account of his life by chance as well as by design. Not only is René able to tell precious little in terms of a genealogy of Derrida's philosophical gift. In fact, his story of it is hardly a story, but rather a number of questions finally concluding its origin to be "a great enigma," "extraordinary" and to "come[...] out of nowhere" (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2002, Scene Selection: no. 12). And to top it all, the clip showing René's use of these phrases has been edited in such a way that the viewer knows that they are made in response to Amy Kofman and her co-interviewer's suggestions. So, rather than presenting the full story of Derrida's intellectual ancestors, the producers of *Derrida* instead countersign Derrida's questioning of biographical story-telling.

René's final admission that he "would be incapable" of telling this story thus has a double function in the film. On the one hand, it functions as a representation of the missing biographical "link" between Derrida's deconstructive thought and his family, insofar as the viewer is invited to hear in René's remark the unpremeditated echo of Derrida saying to Kofman that he would "love to tell stories, but [...] do[es]n't know how to tell them" (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2002, Scene Selection: no. 7). On the other hand, the foregrounding of Kofman and her co-interviewer's role in prompting René's concession to the impossibility of telling his brother's life-story calls attention to its function as part of the meta-biographical story which the film is in the process of telling and constructing. As a result, the exemplarity of the interview with René for the film's poetics seems to consist in its re-inscription of conventional biographical narrative, but *sous rature*, and always in the haunting spirit of Derrida's thought. For the same reason, my earlier characterization of the film as a biography in the (un)making is quite fitting and at same time finds its visual counter-

part in the photocinematographic (de)construction of Derrida's face on the cover of the film.<sup>2</sup>

Later on I shall elaborate on the question that I raised at the beginning of my paper, namely that in its margins the film constructs a persona of Derrida closer to conventional biographical representation. For now I turn to a consideration of what is the nature of his difficulty with biographical narrative and then deal with some of the implications it has for what could be said remains of biography in *Derrida*. Above I quoted Derrida saying that he would love to tell stories, but found himself incapable of doing so. In fact, his questioning of biography is closely tied to "the question of narration" (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2002, Scene Selection: no.7). As he puts it in the same interview with Kofman, "[e]ven when I confide things that are very secret, I don't confide them in the mode of a story" (ibid.), and his withdrawal from (auto)biographical narrative in telling of his

2 In the version of the "Deleted Scenes" section on the DVD with Dick and Kofman's commentary added, it is moreover interesting to observe that at one point Kofman refers to Derrida's constant play of cat and mouse with the film makers' biographical project and their original working title *Chasing Derrida – The Autobiography of the Other* as a reflection of this game. If the working title stresses the (auto)biographical ambition of the film in particular, casting the film makers in the role of the cat and Derrida('s narrative of his own life) in the role of the mouse, the final cut and the change of title into *Derrida* would, however, seem to complicate and reverse the roles of the game. My reflections above indicated that the film is as much chased by Derrida's thought as it chases his biography. An important effect of this is that the film unceasingly reflects a strange sense of belatedness in relation to documenting Derrida's biography. For example, in the clip where Derrida is recorded in his study filling his pipe, and he opens the interview with Amy Kofman by saying: "This is what you call *cinema verité*? Everything is false." The later editing process may have removed any number of introductory questions posed by Kofman, but whatever the case may be, the film is very careful to point out the lagging behind of her questions as they are anticipated by Derrida's meta-documentary comments. In fact, Kofman's questions are all but displaced, or in any case replaced by merely a couple of reply questions, and the genre of her original questions, be it biographical or not, remains to be speculated about.



own life is that he has “always felt that the telling is somehow inadequate to the story [he]’d want to tell” (ibid). This discussion about the limits of narrative is one he refers to as having already begun in his book from 1986 *Memoires for Paul de Man*, which commemorates his friend and colleague Paul de Man’s death.

Here Derrida opens his first lecture-essay by saying: “I have never known how to tell a story” (Derrida, 1989: 3). This rather up-front confession informs the rest of the essay, insofar as it narrates both the possibility and impossibility of giving a true commemorative account of his friend Paul de Man. The latter ambiguity reflects in particular Derrida’s general view of narrative as inadequate. Narrative never represents the world, other people or the self mimetically in any unproblematic way for him. Rather, the constitutive feature of narrative is said to be double. On the one hand, the latter marks a radical disjunction between itself and what it is supposed to give an account of. Apropos of commemorating de Man’s death Derrida claims that it does not take the death of another person to broach such a rupture between narrative account and its subject. Instead, it is the very possibility of narrative which introduces it in the first place because it is defined by its ability to live on irrespective of the presence of its subject. Writes Derrida:

The [...] self [of the other] appears to itself only a bereaved allegory [...] – and even before the death of the other *actually* happens, as we say, in “reality.” The strange situation I am describing here [...] would have allowed me to say all of this even *before* the death [of the other]. [E]verything that we inscribe in the living present of our relation to others already carries, always, the signature of *memoirs-from-beyond-the-grave*. (29, author’s emphasis)

In other words, to give the other its, his or her due in narrative seems, according to Derrida, to be to write their obituary before their death and thus to mark their absence from it in advance. On the other hand, it is also narrative accounts which enable the very possibility of preserving the other among us. The point is, however, that such an account never closes on itself. “It defies,” says Derrida, “any totalization” (Derrida, 1989: 29). If that is the case, this is primarily

due to that constitutive disjunction which narrative opens up between itself and its subject in the attempt to give an account of it. Derrida calls this narrative's allegorical possibility and elaborates upon it in the following way:

[I]t represents one of language's essential possibilities: the possibility that permits language to say the other and to speak of itself while speaking of something else; the possibility of always saying something other than what it gives to be read [...] This is also what precludes any totalizing summary – the exhaustive narrative or the total absorption of a memory. (11)

So, in the final analysis Derrida's ambivalence towards narrative derives from what he elsewhere has referred to as "a suspended relation to meaning and reference" of all linguistic mediations (Attridge, 1992: 48). The inadequacy of narration that he refers to in the film is thus a question of the possibility that it will never be completely congruent with what it tells about because it is capable of dissimulating its meaning and reference.

To return from here to the question of biography and what remains of it in *Derrida*, I would like to dwell a little while on the interview with Derrida that I briefly mentioned in the note above. This scene is interesting because it highlights an essential aspect of his reservations about storytelling and the possibility of biographical narrative. As already pointed out, the scene foregrounds Derrida's meta-documentary commentary on its questionable status as a document of biographical truth. "Everything is false. Almost everything," he says and then points out that he does not usually dress in shirt and trousers. Instead, when he stays at home alone, he keeps on his pyjamas and bathrobe. The implication of Derrida's comments is, of course, that the public nature of appearing in front of a camera tampers with the borderline between private and public, thus calling into question the shot's function as a biographically reliable narrative of his private life. Derrida obviously draws attention to the dependence of any narrative on its communicative situation and the influence of the latter on the kind of 'truth' it tells. In that sense, the scene perfectly illustrates what Derrida has said about the allegorical, that is

to say, double nature of narrative in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, insofar as it has “the possibility of saying something other than what it gives to be read” (Derrida, 1989: 11). This other story that the scene tells is the one Derrida tells by pointing to its cinematic frame.

We could stop our analysis here, but I think that there is a further twist to it, which we should not pass over too easily. Interestingly enough, Derrida orally supplies the lacking biographical story of his working days at home alone. But in the light of his comments on the questionable nature of ‘cinematic *verité*’ in filmed documentary narratives, the viewer is inevitably invited to wonder whether these comments will not turn on Derrida’s own story. Nevertheless, I am not so sure that this means that we should start checking the truth of the story by asking: ‘Well, does he now actually wear pyjamas and bathrobe, when staying home to work?’ Rather, the very cinematographic frame of *Derrida*, whose claim to truth is bound up with the possibility of visual representation, in comparison reminds the viewer of an important generic lack of oral narrative, when it appears on film. It has no visual evidence to present to match what is there to view.

Later on in the film Derrida speaks to Kofman about the myth of Echo and Narcissus and its thematization of the difference between the voice and the image, and here he mentions the essential blindness of speech: “And as always with speech, one is blind. To speak is not to see. So to some extent all speech is blind” (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2002, Scene Selection: no. 11). This statement comes to reverberate ironically in any re-viewing of the earlier scene and comments allegorically on the story that Derrida’s story about his dressing habits at home does not explicitly ‘give to be read’ – namely, that his story must needs present itself as just one more story, and even one whose referent it only proffers. In that sense, this meta-dimension of the scene raises serious questions about *what* is biographical fact in the film – and whether it can be told in any of the genres it employs, visual or oral. In any case, it stresses the very Derridean point of the supplementary nature of all representation. Just as Derrida’s oral narrative needs the supplement of private visual reality to become a fact, so the image of him in shirt and trousers is

supplemented by spoken testimony to be exposed as a fiction of a private fact.

What is perhaps even more disturbing is, however, the artificiality which Derrida points out informs the attempt to cinematically document an essentially private situation. The visual narrative of his private life he tells on film is different from the one he says he would present, were there no camera on; in real life he would never appear in shirt and trousers. Yet, *Derrida* also suggests that Derrida's oral narrative about how he really dresses may equally be affected by the semi-public situation of the filmic context. Despite its confessional appearance there is every possibility that his story is a different story from the one he would tell on more intimate terms.

Whatever the case, the next clip presents a reading by Kofman of a paragraph from *Dissemination* (1981), which has important implications for how much biographical confession the film leaves to be read in Derrida's oral narrative. But before we get to a more detailed reading of this passage, let us dwell for a moment on the visuals of the clip, insofar as they seem to comment silently on the contents of Kofman's reading. The reading is attended by a shot where a spying camera eye shows and gradually zooms in on Derrida rummaging about in his study, a patio-like room visible from the garden through its glass-covered front. The clip plays at having caught Derrida at a moment when he is not observant of the camera's presence, as if what presents itself to the viewer and what the viewer is getting ever closer to is a view of the real private Derrida.

Such a glimpse of biographical truth is, however, not immediately at hand. Not only does he still wear shirt and trousers; almost the entire shooting of the clip takes place with Derrida behind glass. Even when the camera has been moved into the house, the viewer's attention is drawn towards the intervening glass doors separating his study from the rest of the house and the recording camera, just as much as to Derrida himself. So, if Derrida is present to view, he is at the same time physically absent from the room where the film crew is situated. This doubleness in a certain sense mirrors the duplicity of the spectacle that filmic representation more generally offers its audience.

On the one hand, it creates an illusion of visual presence; on the other, there is no actual presence – only a represented one. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida has a discussion of the contradictory logic of how auto-affective representation functions as a supplement for the absent presence of a real erotic object:

The presence that is thus delivered to us in the present is a chimera. Auto-affectation is a pure speculation. The sign, the image, the representation, which come to supplement the absent presence are the illusions that sidetrack us [...] The enjoyment of the *thing itself* is thus undermined, in its act and in its essence, by frustration. Something promises itself as it escapes, gives itself as it moves away, and strictly speaking it cannot even be called presence [...] The supplement is maddening because it is neither presence nor absence. (Derrida, 1976: 154; author's emphasis)

What Derrida writes here adds a further descriptive layer to my characterization of the cinematic experience thematized visually in the clip by way of foregrounding its camera positions. The attending reading from *Dissemination* by Kofman raises the same issue to a discursive level by questioning the ontological status of Philippe Sollers's metatextual narrating voice in his novel *Nombres* (1969).

In addition, however, it also reflects back on Derrida's voice attending the representation of his apparently private appearance in the preceding scene. The intertextual link between Kofman's reading and this scene is established through an effect of grafting. The excerpted passage from *Dissemination* refers to – without directly mentioning it – how Sollers's metatextual narrator allegorizes the novel's readers as an audience watching a play being performed on stage. Most important is, however, that Sollers's narrator appears to cross the boundary ontologically separating the real world of the readers from the fictional world of the text when he comments metatextually on the text that he himself is part of. In allegorical terms, this is figured in the image of the actor stepping out of his role in order to address the spectators directly and explain to them that it is a play they are watching.

When Derrida steps out of *his* role and points to its artificiality as a true representation of his private self, his act has a striking

resemblance to that of Sollers's metatextual narrator. In fact, the viewer is even invited to infer that the referent of Kofman's reading is Derrida. The lifting of the passage from *Dissemination* has stripped it of so many of its references to the context of Sollers's novel that it begins to communicate differently by being grafted into the scenic sequence of *Derrida*. Instead of questioning the ontological status of Sollers's narrator, the passage begins to have an identical effect in the film, but now with respect to Derrida in his role as meta-cinematobiographical critic.

If Derrida defamiliarizes the filmic spectacle of his private life, Kofman's reading of the passage from *Dissemination* gives the scene another turn by the screw of *Verfremdung*. The illusion of enjoying the presence of the 'thing itself' when Derrida contrasts the film's false rendering of his private self with his own story of it is seriously called into doubt by its juxtaposition with Kofman's reading in the next scene:

But who is it that is addressing you? Since it is not an "author," a "narrator," or a "deus ex machina," it is an "I" that is both part of the spectacle and part of the audience; an "I" that, a bit like "you," attends (undergoes) its own incessant, violent reinscription within the arithmetical machinery; an "I" that, functioning as a pure passageway for operations of substitution, is not some singular and irreplaceable existence, some subject or "life," but only, moving between life and death, reality and fiction, etc., a mere function or phantom. (Derrida, 1982: 325)

The passage from *Dissemination* reminds the viewer that in whichever capacity Derrida speaks in the film there is no pure presence of his real biographical self. Although Derrida breaks the cinematobiographical frame by criticizing its artificiality in the earlier clip, this does not mean that any fundamental ontological break with filmic framing has taken place. His criticism of 'cinematic *verité*' in filmed representations of private life is itself uttered from within the film and not from a position outside it – an irony or spin on the matter which we should not suspect him of not all the time being aware of. Kofman's reading seems to bear out both these points. Not only does the quote underline the strange duplicity characterizing all subjects of

meta-communicative acts, it also recognizes Derrida's recognition of this feature, inasmuch as Kofman's reading is capped by a source reference to *Dissemination*.

Especially noteworthy is the written version's use of scare quotes around central terms such "author," "narrator," "life" and not least "I." They serve to suspend the 'normal' reference of these terms precisely in order to stress the fact that Sollers's meta-fictional narrator inhabits a highly indeterminate position between reality and fiction and not one which is anchored securely in either of them. In the film these quotations marks remain invisible to the audience, but in Kofman's reading they nevertheless have a certain ghostly presence, as the purpose of the whole quote is to question any simple positioning of Sollers's meta-fictional narrator on the side of reality or life. The more reason there is for the audience of *Derrida* to think of Derrida's voice recounting the 'true' story of his private dressing habits as one which emerges not unambiguously from life, but just as much from within a filmic representation of life. In this way Dick and Kofman constantly seem to draw on Derridean insights into the nature of representation similar to those I discussed above with reference to *Of Grammatology*. In this particular instance when Derrida is shown to critique the artificiality and falsity of the film's rendering of his private life, this very criticism is at the same time exposed as not bringing the audience any closer to a real presence of Derrida's life. Dick and Kofman's film about Derrida is therefore in a consistently reflexive and self-reflexive manner a portrait of him in which the limit between life and its representation becomes barely discernible – even if it is remarked upon throughout.

An interesting case in point is the sequence in which Derrida and his wife are interviewed about their first encounter and how they first fell in love. Not surprisingly, the interviewing situation at first becomes the subject of the conversation between the Derridas and Kofman because the film crew has to adjust the light twice. Derrida draws attention to the difficulty of having to tell something very intimate and private in a context of the camera recording, which is both artificial and semi-public. In addition, he mentions the lack of

spontaneity afflicting any attempt to tell about his first meeting with Marguerite when he simultaneously cannot stop reflecting on the presence of the camera. In fact, the whole sequence plays on these cumulative layers of reflection which interpose themselves between the biographical event itself and its representation in the film. Not only do both Marguerite and Derrida himself reflect on their difficulty with revealing more intimate details of their first encounter other than more uninteresting facts such as when, where and under which circumstances it took place, but they also play with these reflections, insofar as they pose teasingly rhetorical questions such as: "Should we tell?" and thereby imply that they could if they would (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2002, Scene Selection: no. 7). Similarly, the interview is interrupted and followed by clips where we watch Derrida watching a recording of the interview, thus literally drawing the story's telling into a hall of filmic reflecting mirrors.

During the interview Derrida has even jokingly punned on the name of a filmic light-adjusting device called a 'reflector', whose presence he says cannot but make him reflect on the artificiality of the recording situation. Furthermore, the interview with Marguerite and Derrida is submitted to the latter's reflections in a subsequent interview with Kofman where he is asked about the difficulties of biographical narrative. And it is here he mentions what I have already discussed above, namely that biographical storytelling is always somehow inadequate to the event of life it sets out to convey because all storytelling is mediated by particular circumstances of utterance. If Marguerite and Derrida cannot give Kofman their love story, it is due to the fact that it has to be told under the complicating circumstances of a film making.

Nevertheless, Dick and Kofman offer their audience an interesting additional layer of reflection on biographical representation and the question of the presence or absence of Derrida's life from its porraiture in the film. In-between the interviews two clips have been interposed, one where Marguerite and Derrida are seen at breakfast before leaving for work, another where they are leaving what I suppose must be the university where he works, *L'Ecole Normale*



*Superieure*, Paris. The former is recorded with sound, the latter is silent. Both present images of what looks like a very ordinary example of private life – breakfasting, kissing each other goodbye, and walking the streets while chatting and patting each others' shoulders affectionately.

Despite Marguerite and Derrida's refusal to tell anything significant about their first encounter, the viewer is yet placed in a reading position by the film in which he or she is made to reflect on the possibility whether the two clips could be seen as its quiet offering of a glimpse of Derrida's private life. The first clip, however, breaks this illusion because just before leaving the house for work, Marguerite wishes not only Derrida a good day, but includes the entire film crew in her address. The second clip is also somewhat disturbing of the biographical illusion to the extent that the couple is accompanied by a third person whose identity remains unknown. The viewer cannot help asking whether he belongs to the Derrida family, or if he is one of the film crew. All the same, whatever remains of biography in *Derrida* is never without some sort of reflective commentary, be it explicit or more obliquely present.

One instance remains where the borderline between Derrida's life and its representation on film is not constantly commented on. This instance constitutes the odd exception, however. It is the recording of an interview with Derrida telling about his traumatic experience of being separated from his mother and sent to school. At the end of the film Derrida deflects a question by Kofman about traumatic breaks in his life by telling her that he would not be able to talk about them, and yet there is one interview where he actually tells the story of such a traumatic break. The catch is that the latter interview has been edited out of the film and relegated to its margins in the DVD version's special features section of deleted recordings. The DVD version of *Derrida* thus calls attention to the nature of the image that the film constructs of Derrida, just as it highlights the constructedness of this image. What results is a film in which the biographical *per se* becomes subordinate to its questioning and evades representation other than from a point of view of self-reflexivity.

To conclude, then, I will return to the subtitle of this essay – “How to Appreciate Derrida as a Late Romantic”. When I speak about Derrida in my subtitle, I am referring both to the person bearing that name in Dick and Kofman’s film and the film itself. Both seem to draw on the Romantic *topos* of unrepresentability in their treatment of biographical portraiture. In the Anglo-American literary tradition there is a Romantic strain going back at least to Shelley and continuing up till Wallace Stevens, which struggles with and obsessively reflects on the question of how to represent life and to forget that it is just a representation. In Stevens’s *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) we find an example which on reflection could be said to echo many of the concerns with reference to biography uttered by Derrida as well as shown by *Derrida*:

But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,  
On the image of what we see, to catch from that

Irrational moment its unreasoning,  
As when the sun comes rising, when the sea  
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.  
Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.  
We reason about them with a later reason.  
(Stevens 1987, 398-399)

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## 5 Faces of Derrida: A Dialogue

### Dialogue themes

- Framing
- Transmission
- Faces
- *L'amour ou La mort?*
- Archives

### Framing

The film *Derrida* has one scene showing Derrida watching Derrida watching Derrida. The regression, almost *ad infinitum*, would seem to have the specific purpose to hammer home the point that all communication is mediated, and aim for an almost Brechtian *Verfremdung*-effect. Derrida strikes the same cord by insisting on drawing attention to the artificiality of the making of the film, where questions have to be repeated and answers interrupted when the light or the sound is not just right. He furthermore deconstructs the interview process by constantly referring to the impossibility of answering questions without specific contexts, frames and grounds. This makes it easy to characterize the film as a meta-documentary, or an always-already deconstructed communication mainly dealing with the act of communicating about philosophy, rather than communicating philosophical insight as such. Philosophy is thus shown to be communication, transmission, situated and framed speech acts.

As framers of Derrida and *Derrida* we need to take this poetics into account, whether it irritates us or not. What are the repercussions

for our papers of this insistent meta-dimension to the film and to much of Derrida's writing?

*Responses to "Framing"*

CE: One of the effects that framing of any kind has on viewers (or readers) is to seemingly put a stop to continuity, as it were. As scholars (see Avital Ronell's influential book, *The Telephone Book*) have already shown us, transmission is not something that only has to do with media. The gist of prevalent arguments on the aesthetics of telecommunication is that transmission exists by virtue of continuous electrical impulses as a constant flow. Transmission, then, happens all the time. What media such as the telephone or the fax machine point to, at least as we have them represented in the Derrida film, is that they act as framing devices. The telephone frames thought as it moves between speech and inscription.

One scene in particular illustrates this point: when Derrida is filmed as he talks on the phone, it is clear that while he feels framed by the camera, which is after freezing a moment with "Derrida on the phone", he is not so conscious of also being framed by the telephone itself. Between the camera and the phone he tries unconsciously to connect speech with writing by fiddling with several pens on his desk. The pens are without their cap, so Derrida with one hand eagerly wants to make sure that the ink will not dry. Had it not been for the camera, perhaps Derrida would have sat down and doodled, used the pens instead of trying to rescue them from drying out. Thus, the flow that might have been produced in writing is interrupted. However, the conversation on the phone takes on what might be termed as verbal doodling – nothing is really said, there is only affirmation and negation, the voice is present on the phone, but the mind is absent from the exchange. The mind is preoccupied with pens. Thus, the phone is taken over by the pen. Yet, just as Descartes was hit by the idea that the mind/soul relationship was actually framed by the doodling in the air that his pen was making while writing, so Derrida

is aware that transmission also and invariably contributes to what is being left unsaid.

SLC: The infinite regress of Derrida watching Derrida watching Derrida also extends backwards unto us as spectators. Derrida envelops and penetrates us and so we must ask how we separate ourselves from the event of Derrida unfolding before us? We are framed by the film and so forced into the film itself. Through this we complete the film. Just as reality supplements the image to make it realistic, so do we as spectators supplement the film by our experience of it. The film's framing of us is thus necessary to complete the film. Framing becomes the constitutive element of the film and so Derrida can only be in the film because he can be framed, just as we are only spectators when we are framed by the film. Being framed by a text, that framing always occurs, is one of the basic parameters of Derrida's writings. To break the frame is much of what his project has dealt with quite explicitly. Just because framing always occurs, is indeed necessary in order to communicate, it does not mean that framing should be quietly accepted. Rather, just as logocentrism is needed but must always be contested, so framing and the act of framing must always be exposed. Drawing attention to lights, microphones and the entire presence of a film crew is the only way to faithfully make a documentary; exposing the un-natural parts of what is supposedly the natural process of simply 'being yourself' in screen, which is a distinct impossibility. The natural is thus alienated and exposed as the artifice it 'truly' is.

SHB: As I have claimed in my essay, *Derrida* in different ways could be said to register its own belatedness in relation to Derrida's meta-commentary in his writings as well as in the film. The sense of being a latecomer, for example, manifests itself by the fact that Dick and Kofman almost somnambulistically have to perform all the deconstructive tricks on film that Derrida has already introduced in his writings. Had the film not done so and produced a mainstream biographical portrait of Derrida, it would have been accused of intellectual naivety and bad faith. This is especially true if we take

into account that the film itself is an example of situated communication.

Amy Ziering Kofman is a Yale graduate and studied Derrida's writings while she was a student there. In addition, the film also appears to address itself to an educated audience in that it takes for granted that its viewers would be familiar with Derridean deconstruction. In other words, under such circumstances *Derrida* has somehow been forced to incorporate Derridean terminology and become a meta-biography of Derrida from the very beginning. The repercussions of this predicament amount to, among other things, a style of filmic representation that abandons narrative linearity and instead resorts to a collage-like tapestry of self-reflexive commentaries on the very act of biographing Derrida on film. In this way, there is a certain sense of indebtedness of the film in relation to Derrida's writings, which is highlighted by the fact that Kofman's readings of central quotes literally repeat his words. Repetition is, however, not the only result. The fact that Derrida's words are uttered in a different context and by a different voice by being read aloud by Kofman means that they begin to function and signify in a different way. This is not an issue which the film itself addresses directly, but is left to be read as a very Derridean point by its implied academic audience. Precisely this aspect of watching the film would very much go to characterize what it means to write an academic essay about it. The self-reflexivity of the film and Derrida's writings position the academic writer in a predicament similar to the one I have just outlined for the film in relation to Derrida.

BS: As I tried to indicate in my question, the notion of framing and attention to the effects of framing on readers and viewers is not unique to deconstructive thinking. Genette's work on paratexts as thresholds to texts reminds us that no text ever presents itself to us without exterior and transitory frames. Likewise Brecht's work in theatre and many Brechtian inspired critics already drew attention to the artificiality or constructedness of all viewing and reading circumstances, several decades before deconstruction came about.

Philosophy is of course not immune to these mediations, and I might be tempted to argue that philosophical discourse is a particularly pointedly framed discourse, not least of course in the Derridean mode, as some of the quotes in my paper also show. In fact, several of my colleagues' responses to this first question also seem to have brought out the inner deconstructivists in them, sometimes making them sound more orthodox and rigorously Derridean in their replies in this forum than they did in their original papers. This could of course just be a case of language as a virus, and Derridean language as a particularly virulent one...

That being said, I have no quarrels with the insight that the framing functions as one of several supplements to the text as SLC points out, or that framing adds to the belatedness of the filmic text as SHB convincingly shows in his paper. I just insist that our awareness of being supplemental and belated also feeds back into our perception of the text we supplement and alters our reading of it (cf. Brecht's *Verfremdung* as politicizing strategy). Framing is therefore also a strategy of transmission and meta-transmission.

CE: Another instance in the film that links transmission with framing is found in the closing scene. We have a clear instance of the fact that transmission is always a continuous flow and that framing is relational in that context. Derrida's intent gaze, while sitting in his armchair, flows unflinchingly past the unmarked bodies of technicians that pendulate between him and the camera, up close in front of him and in close-up as far as the viewer is concerned. The fact that we tend to focus on Derrida's eyes while seeing mainly the technicians' legs represents a significant moment. It may be that the film crew has achieved its aims, and is now ready to disconnect, as the packing and gathering of the cables show, but cutting transmission as such is impossible. And here I would suggest that one of the messages that are being transmitted even while transmission is cut is that Derrida's thought becomes a matter of existential close-ups which dictate between interruptions: I frame therefore I am.



## Transmission

In the film we see Derrida applying gadgets and electronic means of communication of many kinds. We hardly ever become privy to the contents of any of these transmissions. A typical example is the fax Derrida attempts to send, and of which we can only decipher the signature. Derrida has often written about media of electronic storage and transmission, but perhaps never explained what the actual relations are between presence and absence (or deferred presence) in various types of electronically mediated transmissions such as phone and fax messages.

What is the role of the signature in transmission, and what does the signature sign – that which is transmitted, the act of transmission, or the potential of transmission alone?

### *Responses to “Transmission”*

CE: For Derrida, acts of transmission are similar to acts of deconstructive reading or writing. They are both gestures rather than methods. It is interesting to note in the film that whenever Derrida wants to make a point that may be related to transmission on some level, he mentions the word gesture. There are at least three occurrences of the notion of gesture, each time offering us to respond. One responds to gestures. One of Derrida’s preoccupations in *The Post Card*, for example, revolves around the idea that one never responds, as it were, to a postcard. One writes back letters, but one never sends postcards in return. One’s gesture of sending, in other words, is being interrupted in its very act of transmitting something insofar as the potential of getting an answer does not fully exist. It is for this reason that Derrida in *The Post Card* develops the notion of sending oneself to someone or to oneself. Transmission as a gesture then takes place in a space between a response and its absence. The film engages with this idea to some extent, particularly at the point

when we have a close up on Derrida's signature on the sheet of paper destined to the fax machine. The signature functions as a sort of insurance that covers response. When we sign things, we send ourselves the excess of our names (to someone or to ourselves). This excess falls between transmission and the machine and thus becomes a text.

BS: Both gesture and speech are activities that originate with body activities. Ultimately we rely on the body as our main communication device, but that device is equally untrustworthy and malfunctioning. One interlocutor mumbles, another is a Spoonerist and scrambles the order of syllables, words and sentences. Communication is therefore always signed by its obstacles and the potential of its malfunctioning. It is therefore nothing short of a miracle that Derrida wrote and published as many texts as he did, and likewise that we lesser lights can produce even this text. Machines, of course, do not completely disembody communication, but often they do give the illusion that malfunctions occur on their own, without human agency.

CE: In her review essay on the book *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Arts, Media, Architecture* (1994) Erin Manning points to spacing as an alternative to criticism. Following Derrida, Manning notes that "deconstruction is not that which comes *to* the text, but rather that there is text as soon as deconstruction is engaged in fields said to be artistic, visual or spatial". As Derrida puts it: "There is text because there is always a little discourse, the effect of spacing already implies a textualization" (Derrida in Manning). Transmission based on spacing, gesture, and excess emphasises what is left unsaid in potential statements that make us stumble over the impossible. Derrida's 'framed' eloquence in the film does not settle in measuring the calibre of its own potential to produce aphoristic statements à la "deconstruction is a gesture" all according to how many ideas can be shot through transmission with as few bullets as possible, as it were. Derrida's eloquence both in writing as well as in speech makes space for passing, passing of judgements, evaluations, faces...

BS: In one of his most spaced out texts, *Glas*, Derrida urges us to 'space' stating as a call to arms, "Let us Space" (75). The text continues poetically: "The art of this text is the air that it causes to circulate between its screens. The chainings are invisible, everything seems improvised or juxtaposed. This text induces by agglutinating rather than demonstrating, by coupling and decoupling, gluing and ungluing" (75). How about that for 'framed' eloquence?

SLC: Just as Derrida signs the film to give it authority; to authenticate its existence as documenting parts of his life, so do we sign our papers and answers to authenticate the institutionalised validity and intellectual legitimacy. In this sense, the (abstract) signature is meant to comment on the validity of the transmission: this is Derrida/this is intellectually valid. As such, the signature only applies to the status of the transmission; indicating an absent presence of the signer to guarantee and form the transmission as object. But this process of signing only occurs precisely because of the absence of the signer; hence the act of signing refers to the act of transmission in a different medium, since a signature is not required if one is present. As a transmission usually only exists as a potential communication, indicated by the fact that a transmission might never reach its goal, so is the signature also only a communicative potential. The signature then transforms and moves into the transmission to the extent that the two become inseparable. A signature signs a transmission in all three stages: potential, act, and object. But conversely a transmission requires a signature, otherwise the communicative action disintegrates as the sender evaporates. Hence signature and transmission are two sides of the same coin: inseparable and interdependent.

SHB: The questions of what constitutes the role of the signature in transmission and of what it signs are ones which I think cannot be answered in any straightforward manner. First of all, there would be the whole issue of upholding the signature in its conventional role as a sign that a transmission emanates from a stable point of emission. Despite the fact that *Derrida* carries the signatures of Amy Ziering Kofman and Kirby Dick as the producers or authors of the film, it at the same time calls into question the singularity of its signatory. My

earlier references to the strong indebtedness of the film to Derrida's writings somehow install the name 'Derrida' as its ghost or double signature. This is precisely what the film could be said to reflect upon by being entitled *Derrida*. But such a reading of the signature in the film needs the counter-signature of a reader to make it explicit – unless, of course, its possibility has already been signed by Derrida, Kofman and Dick in advance. But this at the same time means that if any transmission could be said to have properly taken place, we would have to know if it ever had any identifiable sender in the first place. Since there are always signature effects, insofar as texts are signed according to the laws of copyrighting, it is possible to argue that a signature signs what is transmitted. On the other hand, since *Derrida* seems to imply that transmissions never carry any single signature, the signature signs their endless potential of transmission.

BS: The most endearing aspect of watching Derrida bumble about in his house struggling with mundane transmission tasks such as faxing, speaking on the phone, etc. is that it reminds us of how gadgets designed to facilitate communication also inherently complicate and impede it. Those communication supplements we are forced to use nowadays have a materiality about them that opens up for an estrangement effect, as we discussed above in the context of film making apparatus. Communication apparatus offers the same features via their material being and the resistance to communication they put up. Ink-jet cartridges dry up, pens fall on the floor and disappear under furniture, the Internet connection is disrupted, Spanish travel agents switch off their fax machines during lunch, etc. Thus there are not only infinite potentials but also infinite deferrals involved in transmission.

## Faces

After some discussion we decided to frame our event with the title *5 Faces of Derrida*. The film contains a large number of close-ups of Derrida's face(s), and he talks animatedly about facial features such as eyes and mouths. The contention that the eyes remain, even in an old man, the eyes of the child is provocative in this context.

Have we confused faces with masks, have we seen any of Derrida's faces in the movie, have we touched (upon) any of them in our papers?

### *Responses to "Faces"*

BS: More loaded than most of the other questions, this one demands to be answered in the most negative and negating manner. The face is a text whether we want it to be or not, but it is a text which many of us are inept at interpreting. The contention, which Romantics of all sorts subscribed to, that the eyes are the mirrors of the soul, is a significant part of the mystique of faces, the belief that faces somehow hold the key to unmediated truth. I was truly startled when Derrida referred to the eyes as being a reservoir of innocence, or as projecting childish qualities. This Romantic notion evokes Poe's fascination with human eyes, as found for instance in his story "Ligeia". Poe at least knows that the eyes are also a source of terror, but this insight seems to be missing from Derrida's notion of the function of the eyes.

SLC: To say that the eyes remain the same is to say that we see everything anew, like a child. This seems a strangely naive thing to say; it sounds as if it must come from the mouth of a child. Though Derrida argues that the private and personal must be present in the writings of a philosopher, he also admits that his own life is only obliquely referenced in his works; they are hidden from the sight of others and must be spoken to be noticed. So even if the face of Derrida 'shines through' his writings, it seems to be a Janus-face

looking at us and confronting us, while at the same time looking away from us and ignoring us. Acknowledging a personal presence within his works he reveals a face but it is not his own, or at least not wholly his own or his own whole face. The face always looks both ways and so refracts into many different faces. When one is shown, another is hidden. These faces become masks, hiding as much as revealing, making it impossible to touch or touch upon Derrida's true face.

CE: The face is a trace, Derrida has implicitly and repeatedly transmitted throughout his work, taking his cue from Emmanuel Levinas on both face and trace (see *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 1991). The face, for Levinas, assumes transcendental proportions, the face being the "signifyingness of the beyond" (*signifiance de l'au-dela*), a signification process which enables the face to transcend the frame. The face is always exposed to exteriority in the sense that we never perceive of a face being 'naked', being exposed in itself to its own nakedness. Our perceptions of faces have a predicative function: we think a face is beautiful, pensive, ugly, distorted, and so on. We thus impose finality onto the face. The face is framed by a trace. As Levinas says, the face is "a trace in the trace of an abandon, where the equivocation is never dissipated" (1991: 94). One of the more interesting themes that the film investigates is the equivocation between the face, trace, transmission, and finality. If we make the assumption that Derrida is concerned with the nakedness of his face, and the way in which it exposes itself to finality, then it would not make sense to talk about the 5 or more faces of Derrida. Instead we should talk about the face as it presents *itself* to us without adornment, and not about the face(s) that we 'see', and on which we bestow predicates of framing finality. Says Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* 1969: "The nakedness of the face is not what is presented to me, to my powers, to my eyes, to my perceptions, in a light exterior to it. The face has turned to me – and this is its very nudity. It *is* by itself and not by reference to a system" (74–75).

There is a comic scene in the film which makes us think of nakedness, though not that of the face but of the body, when Derrida laments the fact that he has to dress already in the morning, something

he never does when he is by himself. After a pause and repetition of the statement that he *never* dresses, one is more than invited to visualise Derrida walking naked in his house at least half the day. With some relief, though, it is disclosed a few minutes later that he does wear a robe. The pause, however, has more than made its mark. It has exposed the idea of nakedness, not in its finality but in its totality. Let us then assume that if Derrida has 5 faces here, he has them by virtue of the face's ability to become a trace of its own shadow and thus transcend any referential systems.

BS: The reason why the movie is so preoccupied with portraiture and relies so heavily on loaded close-ups, to me is also a reflection of the film makers' unconscious desire to get under Derrida's skin and get at some deeper truth of the man he is/was. This desire is in some ways a displacement of a fascination, because if one could indeed get at the hidden depths, one could take this depth in, digest it and move on. Derrida probably feared being eaten by the public's gaze, but perhaps he saw through this simple desire to ingest and digest with ones eyes, since he consented to being gazed at. Of course we never reach through his eyes to the soul, just as we never exhaust the multiplicity of his faces and each one's multiplicity of meanings.

SHB: We might indeed have confused faces with masks by entitling our event *5 Faces of Derrida*. Yet, faces can also function as masks – at least according to the English language. You may put on a face in the same way as you put a mask on in order to hide your face. For that reason there does not seem to be any fundamental difference between face and mask. Despite Derrida's remark that facial features such as the eyes remain the same throughout a person's entire life I still wonder what he would make of the English idiom 'to make eyes at somebody'. For if eyes can be dissimulated and made up as we know they can, do we then really see the other's eyes? The film would also seem to render any essential distinction between face and mask spurious, insofar as its self-reflexivity raises doubts about the authenticity of any of its representations of Derrida's face. As a corollary, there would be no way of knowing if our papers have touched upon it – unless it is reproducible as a mask would be.

## L'amour ou la mort?

In the film a memorable scene features Derrida struggling to philosophise on the concept of love. He resists doing this and frames his eventual answer with a contextualization of the concept as a difference between *who* and *what* one loves, a distinction dating back to Plato. While Derrida (as a first deconstructive frame to his answer) playfully asks the interviewer whether she was inquiring into the nature of love (*l'amour*) or death (*la mort*), his answer perhaps elucidates nothing more clearly than the artificiality of that distinction, ranging as it does from resisting the concept of love as philosophically valid *per se*, to glossing love as a function of death.

Is love worthy of the philosopher's attention, and if not, why should the literary critic bother to do the philosopher's dirty work?

### *Responses to "L'amour ou la mort"?*

SHB: I would like answer this question in a sort of backhanded manner by insisting that it is perhaps not possible to distinguish absolutely clearly between the genre of philosophy, that of literary criticism and even that of poetry in the attempt to philosophize about love. Derrida's reference to Plato when he discusses the difference between *who* and *what* one loves draws attention to a basic ambiguity in the philosophical definition of love. Thus, he deconstructs the very notion that a philosophical definition of love exists as one that could not also be said to look suspiciously like a poetic definition of it. A further implication of this would be to insist that for Derrida love has never left philosophy to be only worthy of the attention of literary critics and poets. Love has, for example, not been treated more poetically than by a philosopher when Plato writes about it in his *Symposion*. Even philosophy itself could be seen as a very long and complicated love story among male family members. This is something that the American post-philosopher Richard Rorty has



claimed in his essay “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing” (1982) where he writes that “[p]hilosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form and matter, but by tradition – a family romance involving, e.g., Father Parmenides, honest Uncle Kant, and bad brother Derrida” (92).

SLC: If it is artificial to separate love and death, do we love death? Do we love Derrida or do we love what he did? The film inevitably changes now that Derrida has died. It will become even more fetishistic now that it is one of the few places to still see Derrida, and so he will become an icon worshipped on screens around the world, just as the film poster can now be purchased, so that Derrida can be framed and hung on a wall like any other pop idol would be. Derrida’s death initiates, therefore, a different love of the film, showing him ‘how he was’ indicating a moment when he was alive but kept alive only through the death which the image enacts. Derrida was of course never an image, but we can only fetishize an image and so must frame Derrida in order to love him and in this process he is frozen in time and so dies.

CE: In *The Telephone Book* Avital Ronell makes the assumption that “the telephone flirts with the opposition life/death by means of the same ruse through which it stretches apart receiver and transmitter or makes the infinite connection that touches the rim of finitude” (85). The implication is that when we are not dealing with spacing we are dealing with distances. There is a distance between love and death, and it is between this distance that one sets up one’s connections. “Philosophy, love of wisdom, asserts a distance between love and wisdom, and in this gap that tenuously joins what it separates, we shall attempt to set up our cables” (3) she further states and makes the Derridean point about identity. Who or what, *bios* or *graph*? In the scene “L’amour ou la mort?” Derrida invariably points to the dependency relationship between love and death. Our idea of love is dependent on the belief in the death of love. We are as if on the telephone with our own death when we talk about love. Thus we write our biographies. Says Ronell: “with the telephone on the line, one could not simply write a biography as if nothing had come in between

the *bios* and the graph. One had to invent another form, that of biophony, where the facts of life fall into a twilight zone between knowing and not knowing” (9). One can thus assert that when Derrida insists on identifying what separates the ‘who’ from the ‘what’ he makes a gesture towards hearing. He wants to make sure that he heard Amy Kofman’s question correctly. Yet the question itself “l’amour ou la mort?” awaits a response whose message of understanding is directed towards the distance between what is to be known and who is to know it. Love, for Derrida, is not something philosophers are able to elucidate any more than they can elucidate the question of death. Love therefore takes the path of death, and places itself in an archive box.

When Derrida makes the remark in the film, following Heidegger, that a philosopher’s life is almost always referred to in three stages, “he was born, he thought, he died”, he implicitly situates love in the distance between each of the three stages. Love thus placed becomes an object of discovery, not of ‘who’ and ‘what’ but ‘why’ and ‘how’? This much is clear in Derrida’s innocent counter response to his own question “*L’amour ou la mort?*” which he offers Amy Koffman as a starting point: Why should I say anything about love, and how can I say it? This leaves open the telephone line. Love is in the air.

BS: This was another loaded question, I fear. To me the philosopher must always rely on the dirty work of others. Philosophy prides itself of pondering the fundamental issues, *a priori*. The issues that preoccupy me are not of that order. Therefore I think that Derrida should have told us more about his love life. (He suggest in the movie that he would love to have heard other philosophers describe their sex lives.) We could then have used that as raw material for all kinds of textual analysis, instead of listening to the displaced distinctions of ‘who’ vs. ‘what’ as the object of love. This reflects a desire on my part to hoodoo Derrida’s “who do you love?” into something more tangible, to textualize love and death.

## Archives

Archives and tombstones are playfully compared in the film, and Derrida's amusing fever attack in *Archive Fever* anticipates this joke. One might suggest that archives function as textualized lives, employing various genres such as epitaphs, epigraphs, (auto) biography, fiction etc.

Must we write differently about Derrida now that his archive has found its final resting place, or should we focus even more upon the belated supplemental portions of Derrida's *bios* and *graphein*? How do we do so without undue reverence and sentimentality?

### *Responses to "Archives"*

BS: The more I work with these matters the more it strikes me that writing these papers and responses becomes a work of mourning. Thus it is impossible to do it in a neutral manner. The personal keeps intruding and insists on its place in the archive of Derridean interactions. This project has, if anything, forced my attention far further towards the *bios* of Derrida, and has as yet not furthered my study of his writing as much as I had anticipated and desired. Perhaps the urge towards the epitaphic that this reflects can be compared to the contention I made earlier about the film makers' unconscious desire to consume and be rid of Derrida. The desire in me is similarly to archive him and move on.

This undoubtedly also reflects some of the issues of guilt that I thematized in my essay, and thus I am forced to return to the troubled feelings indicated by my paper title, "Forgiving Derrida for Dying". The request to forgive Derrida was of course never formally issued to me by him or any other person, nor would I ever expect it to be. Rather, I am inclined to think that the one who needs forgiveness is myself, but also that no one other than myself can perform that act. Perhaps the publication of this epitaphic volume can go some ways

toward attaining that goal. Certainly this addition to my textualized life – this archival expansion – is of the confessional kind, as I believe much of Derrida’s own writing, certainly *The Post Card* and *Glas*, was intended as, deliberately on his part.

SHB: I would like to approach this question from an autobiographical point of view. For me it would be very difficult to write sentimentally and reverently about Derrida’s life and writings. I cannot disengage myself from being haunted by my first encounter with him – not as a living person, but as a text signed by the name of Derrida. This text is his book *Of Grammatology*, and here we find a very disturbing and thought-provoking statement that “[a]ll graphemes are of a testamentary essence” (69). On first reading it, this statement struck me and has since then struck me as if Derrida as a living person would always already be dead to me since it was the other textualized Derrida that I came to know through my readings of his writings. Even though I later got the chance to meet him in person at a conference in Kolding some years ago, I still felt that I had not actually met Derrida. He might have borne the same name as the signatory of the books that I had read in the name of Derrida, and yet no relation other than a nominal one appeared to me between the real-life Derrida and his textual doppelganger. So, when Derrida really died this autumn, I did not become anymore sentimental or reverential about his writings or his life than I had been used to so far. The same goes for the fact that his archive has now found its final resting place at UCLA at Irvine. Such archivization is, as the above quote from *Of Grammatology* makes clear, always already in process – irrespective of any institutional attempt to add the finishing touch.

CE: The archive is a matter of discovery and application. The *graphein*’s journey towards discovering the *bios*. What is the response to discovering somebody’s life work as it applies itself to ‘collection’? The only collection that I have in mind here is not so much of epitaphs, or autobiographical epigraphs, but aphorisms as *arche*, in the sense of taking place and having place simultaneously. I am reminded of one of Emil Cioran’s “exasperations” as far as consulting an archive goes: “Devouring biographies one after next to be convinced

of the futility of any undertaking, of any destiny” (Cioran, 1991: 160). We suffer, Derrida also enlightens us in *Mal d'Archive*, (trans. *Archive Fever*, 1995) particularly from how transmission is applied to a space that is both public and private at the same time. We suffer from the pain of reconciliation between the public and the private. Nakedness and adornment. When Derrida comments on the labour of the archivist to dig for information, he makes the point that if the labour is successful then the discovery of ‘origin’ is bound to efface the very labour, the archivist’s signature. “[T]he origin then speaks for itself”. Says Derrida: “The *arche* appears in the nude, without archive. It presents itself and comments on itself by itself” (Derrida 1995: 92–23). Just like the face which appears in the nude, the *arche* which takes place while having a place in the space between archive and archivization is an aphorism written on the epitaph, all naked, as it were. Another aphorism comes to mind: “As long as we live we suffer. Yet we run from death. We like to suffer”. Valeriu Butulescu, another Romanian with a keen sense for naked aphorisms, makes pronouncements that are similar to some of Derrida’s flat deliveries in the film with respect to the archive. Boxing Derrida. Not only is Derrida being framed by the camera, but he is also caught in the process of finding himself an *arche*, taking place among the boxes containing his life and having space in the application of whatever discovery some archivist might make.

SLC: A tombstone presents the only two facts of a philosopher’s life: everything in between is just anecdote. Although Derrida disagrees with this notion of a philosopher’s life, this is never elaborated on in the film. Indeed, the film seems to function as an extended anecdote of a time in Derrida’s life. By not providing any ‘hard facts’ of Derrida’s work it instead remarks on his more personal life. These remarks are of course re-marked by the film which becomes an archive of Derridean anecdotes. An archive is thus a resting place of the anecdotes of Derrida’s life rather than his death. Derrida’s tombstone is thus a marker of Derrida’s death while the archives are markers of his life. It is indeed fitting that there are two Derrida archives so that his life does not become centered.

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