
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Ecce Homo
Edward R. O'Neill
San Francisco, California, USA

Žižek!
Directed by Astra Taylor.
Zeitgeist Films, 2005, 71mins

Derrida
Directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman.
Zeitgeist Films, 2002, 84mins

What Is a Film about Philosophy?

Making a film about a philosopher, or attempting to analyze and critique such a thing, almost immediately poses the sharpest questions about the relationship between film and philosophy, about what we might call film form and philosophical content, questions it would be easier to avoid than to answer. Quickly one might ask: can philosophy ever be merely the content of some other form? And 'other' here almost immediately but not unproblematically implies something about philosophy's relationship to its written verbal form. Put differently, is it a matter of mere indifference whether one writes a book about philosophy or makes a film or sings a song or for that matter does a tap dance?

Surely it cannot be purely a matter of indifference. We know pretty well what a book about philosophy is like, somewhat less well what a film is like. Is *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) 'philosophical'? More or less so than *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962) or *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995)? For songs, I suppose there is the Monty Python philosopher's drinking song. Or then there is something squarely middlebrow and quasi-existential — Don McLean's 'American Pie' in the U.S. or any Jacques Brel in France or Belgium. So we have some idea what a philosophical song might be like. And for tap dancing, well I suppose we have

Stanley Cavell (2005) on Fred Astaire. But while a book about philosophy is a known quantity, there is a significant sense in which these other forms *need to be invented*. We do not know in advance what an 'x about' philosophy is. Non-deeply, one might simply say that the relation of 'aboutness' has that much vagueness to it. Nevertheless, therein lies much of the interest of any film about philosophy.

Philosophical Style

What you think of films about philosophy has something to do with what you think philosophy and film are and how you see the relationship between the two. Namely, is the relationship between the two extrinsic or intrinsic? Is film merely a convenient vehicle for communicating some useful tidbits of information about philosophy — as the History Channel is simply a convenient format for conveying certain information about history? No doubt the format selects, shapes and defines what History then becomes. But then you need some yardstick for what is being communicated — for what History or philosophy are that they might or might not fit into a channel or a film.

I would argue, along Cavellian lines, that film itself poses philosophical questions. In allowing a world to be viewed films pose questions about what kinds of worlds there are and what the experience and responsibility of viewing is. That is: film is philosophical insofar as it is ontological and reflexive — I think that's about the heart of the Cavellian claim. The same question then goes for philosophy. Whether philosophy itself has verbal language as a merely convenient (or inconvenient) vehicle for philosophizing, or whether language might be a necessary subject matter and source of reflection for philosophy, closer to its very substance than an after-the-fact means. If you want to understand film philosophically — say along the quasi-Cavellian lines I sketched out above — there is then a temptation, if not an impulsion, to understand philosophy as also intimately connected with its medium. And if the medium changes, then the character of the thing itself — of philosophy — must change also.

It comes down to the vexed question of style. One can either think of philosophy as a kind of pure content, pure ideas which might be approached in very different material forms; or one can think of the form and style of philosophical discourse as absolutely central to what it is. On the former view, philosophical ideas could simply be expressed by the appropriate cinematic style. But all such stylistic issues would be essentially non-philosophical — indeed one might almost say *philosophically* non-philosophical. That is: philosophy on this view would have for one of its defining traits the subordination, the systematic disregard, of style. On the

contrasting view, philosophy might be nothing other than an engagement with its own stylistic and expressive possibilities — with the possibilities of language, for instance.¹ And here philosophy would come very close to film, such that a film about philosophy, a philosophical film, would be one that explored the medium and its own possibilities as much as it did the subject matter — precisely because to explore that medium was *itself* a philosophical approach, on this second idea of philosophy. In this sense, every film would be philosophical to the extent that it could be understood as exploring its own medium, the limits and possibilities of that medium, the facts of human existence and the ways in which watchfulness makes up an integral part of that existence. The preference for one idea of philosophy's relationship to style over another may be a matter of taste, but it is not, for all that, a preference that is 'merely' aesthetic — in exactly the same way that philosophy's relation to language is not 'simply' a matter of taste. You could say: it *is* a matter of taste, but there's nothing simple about it.

Just the Facts, Ma'am

This is the framework in which I'd like to examine both *Žižek!* and *Derrida*: two films about philosophical thinkers.² At one level, something film can do is to record physical reality. Hence as portrait-films, *Žižek!* and *Derrida* both give us images of their subjects. (We're multiplying generic locations here: films about philosophy, portrait-films....) Thanks to *Žižek!* the film, we can observe certain facts about Žižek the man:

- He speaks to a large and appreciative audience in Buenos Aires.
- He welcomes the filmmaker to his apartment in Ljubljana, points out Stalinist propaganda on the walls.
- He stores his clothes and sheets in kitchen cabinets and drawers.
- He keeps two copies of each of his books, including their translations.
- He defines philosophy while lying in bed shirtless.

¹ See, for example, Wittgenstein's comment:

I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: Philosophy ought really to be written only as *poetic composition*. It must, as it seems to me, be possible to gather from this how far my thinking belongs to the present, future or past. For I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot do what he would like to be able to do. (1980, p.24e)

² All quotations in the text, unless otherwise identified, are directly from the films in question. Where the original is in French, the translation is by the author [ERO].

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- He analyzes toilets in various countries as reflecting the 'basic spiritual stances' of each nation, but he doesn't want to be taken as a 'popular comedian'.
- He argues that differences in plumbing prove that ideology exists.
- He decries ironic distance in the work of Derrida and Butler, differences between whom he seems not to recognize.
- He argues — dogmatically? — that deconstructonists are dogmatic, whereas he is not.
- He claims he hates being recognized and then signs an autograph for an admirer.
- He argues that parental tolerance is a form of despotism while he watches TV with his son.
- He claims he follows Lacan's propositions and logic but not Lacan's style.
- He rejects Lacan's obscurantism but arguably reverses it into pseudo-clarity.
- He decries his own public persona and then stages his own death by suicide for the camera at the bottom of a spiral staircase.

One thing I'm pointing out here is that it's hard to separate a film about Žižek from Žižek's image, his image of himself and his public image. To say this is both to praise and to damn the film: what you think about one is completely bound up with what you think about the other. And it's difficult to watch without wanting to answer back to some of Žižek's more exasperating *pronunciamenti*:

Slavoj Žižek: Isn't love precisely a kind of cosmic imbalance?

Edward R. O'Neill: No, it's not. And I don't think you know what the word 'precisely' means.

SZ: It's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest...change in capitalism.

ERO: So thinks Fredric Jameson, who wrote as much (1994: xii).

SZ: I am not human. I am a monster.

ERO: So nice to meet you?

SZ: I like philosophy as an anonymous job.

ERO: Isn't this a tad ironic coming from a man having a film made about him — and one with an exclamation point in the title to boot?

SZ: What is philosophy?

ERO: A question that is hard to take seriously when it's asked by a man lying shirtless in bed.

SZ: My big worry is not to be ignored but to be accepted.

ERO: Then your worst fear has come true.

SZ: When I appear to be sarcastic and so on, the point is not to be taken seriously. What is to be taken seriously is the very form of sarcasm.

ERO: Seriously?

SZ: *The Fountainhead* (King Vidor, 1949) is the best American movie of all time.

ERO: I'd hate to find out what you think is the worst.

SZ: Name me one point where Sam Weber makes an ironic critical remark on Derrida.

ERO: Sam Weber's 'The Debts of Deconstruction and Other Related Assumptions.' For one. His afterword to *Just Gaming* is critical of Lyotard. That's two.

It must be admitted that for all Žižek's misstatements, overstatements, convenient lapses in memory, tortuous pseudo-logic, he really *does* have an argument to make. As he expresses it in the movie that bears his name: 'The problem today is that the commandment of the ruling ideology is "Enjoy!" Our apparently free — liberal, tolerant, permissive — society is nevertheless regulated, and strictly so, all the more insidiously because this regulation is internalized under the guise of an injunction to enjoy, to consume.' That seems to me fine, as far as it goes. But it can hardly be said that Žižek has a response. Indeed, at one point in the film he asks, 'How to get rid of this injunction to enjoy?' — as if it were a minor social annoyance, rather than a structuring principle in a certain form of society.

Derrida

The opening pre-credits segment of *Derrida* contrasts his depiction on European TV with his everyday private life. Here's some anchor ballyhooing Derrida's importance; there's Derrida putting on his coat. Like *Žižek!* and *Žižek*, *Derrida* and Derrida are completely bound up with one another. The *Derrida* film and DVD, like Derrida himself, call attention to the processes by which the text is produced, as well as to the problem of the relations between the genres of philosophy and that of biography. Throughout the film, Derrida constantly underlines the presence of the camera. Derrida insists on answering a question with a prefatory remark on the 'totally artificial character of this [videotaping] situation,' and the preface turns out to be a part of the answer to the question, not a mere dilation. In one interview, Derrida underlines that the clothes he is wearing are again totally artificial: were he working at home, he would wear pajamas and a bathrobe. And the filmmakers mimic the gesture. The filmmakers show themselves helping Derrida select what clothes will and won't work well on film. We see the sound man fixing Derrida's Lavalier mic — for the film, not for one of the public talks we see him give. Even the DVD menu fakes the visual style of a TV's volume and picture controls.

Derrida as a film biography of its subject is bound to fail — but for reasons that the film itself gives, even relishes. Namely, there is, as yet, no properly philosophical biography, no biography of a philosopher which is itself philosophical as a *biography* — if we can indeed imagine such a thing. There are many biographies of philosophers, but I have never once heard that *any* of them is *itself* a work of philosophy. And for essential reasons. Namely, one of the defining standards of decorum for philosophy — and a standard which is by no means arbitrary, accidental or without consequences — is precisely what Derrida identifies in *Derrida* as the politeness of eschewing the existence of the philosopher as an empirical being — with a history, a shoe size, a sex life, etc.

Perhaps some philosophical works have a more strongly biographical dimension than others, or rather the gaps between or within them do. One thinks, for instance, of the famous 'Adam Smith Problem' of the relation between the philosophy of sympathy and the theory of economics, or of what might also be called the 'Wittgenstein Problem' — the relation between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* which sees them not simply as antithetical but as the result of a conversion whose existence, whose philosophical implication, is inscribed at the beginning of the *Investigations* through a reference to St. Augustine. The biographical dimension of philosophy, at least based on these examples, is precisely a lacuna or rupture in the

text of philosophy, a rupture of philosophy's reason and self-presence, a rupture demanding that biography enter in as a kind of stopgap measure. In one scene from the film that bears his name, Derrida speaks on a panel at NYU and questions the authority of biographical discourse on the philosopher. He cites Heidegger's famous 'biography' of Aristotle. As cited in the film: 'He was born, he thought, and he died. All the rest is pure anecdote.'

To its credit, *Derrida* wrestles with the relationship between anecdote and philosophy. By opening with the public televisual representations of Derrida and comparing them with his daily life, surely the level of the purest anecdote, *Derrida* doesn't just accept the Heideggerian account of the essential inessentiality of biographical data. Rather, the film poses a Derridean question about the standard, even defining philosophical marginalization of biography. The Derridean discourse starts from the Heideggerian discourse, but then inscribes the latter's exclusions to contests its assumptions. That, I would argue, is how you make progress in philosophy. *Derrida's* directors don't hesitate to give us empirical information about Derrida. But it's all oddly trivial or ominous, its triviality underlined somewhat preciously.

- We watch Derrida butter an English muffin.
- Derrida confesses he is bad at telling stories.
- Derrida watches a tape of himself watching a tape of himself.
- Derrida likes to eat potato chips.
- He loves his sister but once tried to set her on fire in her crib.
- His mother once had a very large kidney stone.
- As a boy in Algeria he was the victim of the organized anti-Semitism of the Vichy government.
- Touring South Africa in 1998, he sees Nelson Mandela's former prison cell and is visibly moved.

Throughout *Derrida* its titular figure retains a certain distance. Derrida will give facts and dates — about his marriage, for instance — but not much more. We watch Derrida watching tapes of himself and his wife being interviewed, and then he is asked to comment on specific moments in those tapes, moments and tape we've seen. He's invited, in short, to deconstruct himself, which he does ably (could one expect differently?). And thank goodness for that reticence on Derrida's part. We are thus spared the sight of him lying in bed shirtless and talking about philosophy as

Žižek does. It's not that Derrida might look better shirtless than Žižek – if you like the bear type, Žižek's totally your man. It's that I, for one, don't want to see much of *anybody* lying in bed shirtless talking about philosophy (though Heath Ledger would do nicely in a pinch). *Derrida* thus problematizes the status and project of the film, its possibility, the possibility of its own success. It is a daring move — and a smart one. *Derrida* is in an important sense a Derridean film. This may be its great contribution or its downfall — or both. But the film at least is consistent and intimately bound up with its subject matter. Indeed, if one can carp briefly about a shortcoming of the film, it's that the filmmakers have collapsed film's possibilities into the genres of documentary and biography. Their way of being aware of themselves is to document the process of making the documentary, and to reduce this documentation to an ambivalent biography, a biography of a reticent subject. But surely that leaves out too much — too much of film, too much of Derrida, too much of philosophy even.

What Is Love? On Reticence

A revealing point of comparison is the moment at which one of the filmmakers asks Derrida to talk 'about love.' After sorting out that she wants to know about love (*l'amour*) and not death (*la mort*), Derrida demurs, 'I'm incapable of talking in generalities about love. I'm incapable.' And: 'You can't ask me this. No, no. It's impossible ... I'd either have nothing to say or I'd be reciting clichés.'

Would that Slavoj Žižek contemplated that level of reticence even for a single moment. But no. He tells us about shit. About toilets in various countries and the way they reflect the 'basic spiritual stances' or 'ideologies' of various nations (this is a common cliché among tourists). He opines about love: 'Isn't love precisely a kind of cosmic imbalance?'. He tells us about *The Fountainhead* and permissive parenthood and so on and so on. In other words, there's not much that Žižek *won't* tell us about. There is absolutely no such moment in *Žižek!*, and it's a sad portrait of him for that fact. Maybe Žižek is wiser in a way. He knows that the form of the film demands anecdotes and sound bites, and he's capable of acquiescing, where Derrida, just as conscious, is not. But my question is: should he? Should Žižek acquiesce to the discourse of the sound bite? I mean my question to be understood like the one Wittgenstein asks about Socrates: yes he is able to defeat his opponents, but does he have the *right* to do so? (1980, 56e). Is Žižek right to define love for us?

Certainly Žižek can have opinions about things. Who would deny him that right? I have opinions about love and parenting and *The Fountainhead*, too. But so far as I can tell mine are neither more nor less well-founded than Žižek's. This is at

the level of: Derrida likes Mozart and free jazz (which we find out in the DVD's additional materials). It really is pure trivia. *Derrida* includes such information while disclaiming its significance, though that is perhaps having your cake and eating it too. And perhaps Žižek did so demur, even many times, but all those moments are perhaps on the digital equivalent of the cutting room floor. Whence a certain admiration for Derrida, for finding filmmakers who, even by chance, turned out a very Derridean film.³

In response to the question about love, it's true that eventually Derrida does hammer something out about ontological difference and mourning, something he repeats elsewhere in the film, a kind of default rhetorical gesture on his part. But we can't help but appreciate the dilatory demurrer. *Žižek!* contains two contrasting moments: one I have already mentioned: 'Isn't love precisely a kind of cosmic imbalance?' The other is when Žižek watches Lacan's famous appearance on French television (only in France, eh?). Lacan begins: 'I always tell the truth. Not all. Because one never finishes saying everything. To say all is materially impossible. It's not the words which are lacking. [But] it's even by this "impossible" that the truth touches the real'.⁴ Žižek complains about the 'ridiculous emphasis' of Lacan's 'empty gestures'. But he rather misses the point: Lacan approaches the medium of television with reticence. This is the place where Lacan explains explicitly, in speaking to his largest audience, the necessity of indirection, of style, the impossibility of 'saying everything,' of a way in which truth touches the real by what is lacking. And this is the part of Lacan that Žižek does not accept. Indeed, why, from this perspective, Žižek should even be considered a Lacanian is rather mysterious. It may say more about the sociology of academic fraternities than about Žižek's thought *per se*.

Philosophy's Unpopularity

Asked by a TV interviewer if deconstruction is like the TV sitcom *Seinfeld*, Derrida replies: 'Deconstruction, the way I understand it, doesn't produce any sitcoms.' Which is perhaps the closest Derrida comes in the film to being facile. One way of reading this moment as a relation between the two films would be to say that *Žižek!* is to Lacanian psychoanalysis as *Seinfeld* is to deconstruction. Žižek has no problems being a 'popular comedian' — his own words — despite his rather feeble

³ In the additional footage on the DVD, Derrida explains how he refused to participate in the film, but somehow — through the vagaries of communication — his refusal turned into assent, his 'no' became a 'yes.' In a very strong sense, that 'no' still pervades and even structures *Derrida*.

⁴ The translation is my own.

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protestations to the contrary. Žižek might not produce any sitcoms either, but he wouldn't mind taking *Seinfeld* as indicating, say, the basic spiritual groundlessness of western civilization, or the paradox of *jouissance* in late capitalism. Indeed, it's hard to imagine Derrida even commenting on *Seinfeld* or *The Matrix* or Jet Li, as Žižek does. It isn't that deconstruction 'can't' be rendered popular. Some would argue that deconstruction itself *is* the popularization — of Heideggerean phenomenology, for instance. I'm only underlining here a failure on Derrida's part in this TV interview to question critically the relation between philosophy and popular culture, an insistence on art and artifice for their own sakes. Emphasizing the distance while oneself appearing on television is surely characteristic of the kind of denegation by which high culture maintains both its height and the knowledge by others of its own status.

In a sense, Žižek's position is no better, since for him philosophy and popular culture are too close. In neither case is the gap or relation really thought through: philosophy and popular culture have a non-relation in *Derrida* — deconstruction doesn't produce any sitcoms — or are simply mutually translatable without residue in *Žižek!*. Neither one really comes close to being a *theory* of the relationship *even while the very existence of these two films points to the very conditions which demand such a theory*. Perhaps one should take the question more seriously than Derrida does. *Could* one indeed make a sitcom about deconstruction? Or a sitcom that *was* deconstruction, *was* a deconstruction? *Was Arrested Development* just that? Or are the terms still too confused? No, deconstruction doesn't make any sitcoms, as Derrida says. But there is an important sense in which the assumption of a split between philosophy and, for instance, television is just a bit too hasty — especially in a film about deconstruction. From this angle Žižek gets it more right. Yes, Hitchcock might tell us something about Lacan, although Žižek never tells us why Hitchcock does, how he was able to, what it means that Hitchcock was Lacanian. But at least perhaps Žižek comes closer to thinking that some form of thinking might get into popular culture in some interesting and meaningful way, even while Derrida came close to being a popular figure while at the same time remaining, it seems, rather mystified by that very popularity.

Philosophy as Writing, Filming, Taping

Ultimately neither *Žižek!* nor *Derrida* may tell us what we want to know about the relation of philosophy to film and video in particular or popular culture in general. But they at least take us some way down that path. At exactly the historical moment at which digital video transforms what a 'film' is, somehow, by a logic we have yet to

understand fully, we almost begin to grasp what 'film' was, what a film about philosophy may come to have been.

In one of the most revealing moments in the film that bears his name, Žižek explains that he doesn't actually write. He merely makes an outline, revises, and decides he's done. 'I put down notes. I edit it. Writing disappears.' But if writing, the experience and process of writing, are central to philosophy, then this goes a long way towards telling us why (or how) Žižek is not a philosopher — if one wants to defend a specific meaning for that title. In which case perhaps the video or the webcast is the medium of a new genre, of which Žižek is one of our few exponents, a genre which *was* philosophy. If philosophy's stake or fate was indeed intimately tied to writing and to the cultural status of the written word, even the literary, then the 'disappearance' of writing — in the multimedia universe of films shot on video and downloadable psychoanalyst's TV appearances — might betoken the end of philosophy, or merely the emergence of something like philosophy, but in a new medium. And in the new medium, Derrida's dilatory demurrals, caveats, and qualifications may merely be another, somewhat antiquated form of theatricality, a theatricalization of literariness, no more nor less geared to the new medium than Žižek's endless naked bedtime chit-chat.

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