

The Three Ages of Jacques Derrida

An interview with the father of Deconstructionism

by Kristine McKenna

(Photo by Andrew Cooper)

WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT CRAZY FRENCH INTELLECTUALS and esoteric superstars, when they stumble across the word deconstructionism in *Entertainment Weekly* and wonder what it could possibly mean, when college kids around the world are forced to figure out what it means, as they have been for the last 20 years — it all goes back to Jacques Derrida. One of the reigning figures of intellectual life of the last quarter-century, Derrida is the father of Deconstructionism, a controversial system of analysis designed to dismantle language and reveal the biases and false assumptions embedded within it. Rooted in the belief that language is freighted with things we're either unable or unwilling to bring to full consciousness, Deconstructionism is a flexible methodology applicable to any and all texts — and indeed, the impact it's had on literary criticism is equal to, if not greater than, the mark it's left on philosophical discourse.

Born in 1930 to a family of assimilated Sephardic Jews in what was then French Algeria, Derrida began questioning intellectual prejudice at the age of 10, when Algeria was overrun by France's collaborationist Vichy regime. At that point Derrida was expelled from school after being informed by a teacher that "French culture is not made for little Jews." He went on to a career as a disruptive, inarguably gifted student, and at 19 he moved to Paris to study philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure. It was there he met Marguerite Aucouturier, a psychoanalyst, whom he married in 1957. Attending the school from 1952 through 1956, Derrida focused primarily on the works of the German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and his writings on their work led to a scholarship to Harvard in 1956. Returning to Paris in 1960 to teach philosophy at the Sorbonne, Derrida declared his independence as a philosopher two years later with a translation of Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, appended with a book-length introduction that dwarfed Husserl's essay. In 1967 he laid out his central ideas with the publication of three seminal books — *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Of Grammatology* — which catapulted him to the center of the philosophical discourse. The author of 45 books that have been translated into 22 languages, Derrida was appointed a visiting professor at the University of California at Irvine in 1986. And in a major coup for the university, Irvine began

acquiring the Derrida archive in 1990.

Derrida spoke with me recently in his modest office at Irvine. Given the fearlessness and ambition of his work, he's surprisingly approachable in person, and his ideas seem considerably less daunting in conversation than they do on the page. He's a very charming man, and his charisma comes across clearly in *Derrida*, a documentary directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman that opens this week.

L.A. WEEKLY: Why did you agree to be filmed for *Derrida*?

DERRIDA: I didn't immediately agree to it. I proceeded with deep reservations that had to do with the discomfort I've always felt about my image in photographs. I succeeded in publishing for almost 20 years without a single image of myself appearing in connection with my books, and there were two reasons for that. First, I had what you might describe as ideological objections to the conventional author photograph -- a head shot, a picture of the writer at his desk -- because it struck me as a concession to selling and to media. The second reason was that I've always had a difficult relationship with my own body and image. It's hard for me to look at myself in photographs, so for 20 years I gave myself permission to erase my image on political grounds. Over the last decade that became increasingly difficult, because I was constantly appearing in public spaces at conferences attended by journalists, many of whom took pictures. It finally became impossible to control, and as I felt it was time to overcome this resistance, I finally let it go. And I must say, I was pleasantly surprised by how successfully the film intertwines the private everyday life of family with things less private -- a trip I took to South Africa during the filming, for instance -- and reflections on big subjects. The film has a consistent through line in that it continually questions the biography of authors. Should a philosopher have a biography?

How could a philosopher not have a biography?

Of course he has a biography, but the question I raise is whether we should publish it. Should he himself narrate his own biography? Should he let his own life be public and be interpreted?

How can you separate a philosopher's writing from his life?

I don't know if you can, but most classical philosophers did try to separate them, and some of them succeeded. If you read philosophical texts of the tradition, you'll notice they almost never said 'I,' and didn't speak in the first person. From Aristotle to Heidegger, they try to consider their own lives as something marginal or accidental. What was essential was their teaching and their thinking. Biography is something empirical and outside, and is considered an accident that isn't necessarily or essentially linked to the philosophical activity or system.

In the film you're asked: If you could listen to the philosophers you've admired talk about anything, what would you like to hear them talk about? You reply, "Their sexual lives, because it's the thing they don't talk about." But when the interviewer then asks you about your own sexual life, you decline to answer. Why is this territory off limits?

I declined to answer not because I think these things must be hidden, but because I don't want to disclose the most personal aspects of my life while improvising in front of a camera in a foreign language. If I'm to discuss such things, I prefer to sharpen my own tools -- my writing. If you read me, you'll find there are many texts where I address these questions in my way. *Glas* [published in 1974], *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* [1980], and *Circumfession* [1991] are autobiographical, and my own life and desires are inscribed in all of my writing.

Can you recall the moment when you first realized that god, as the word is conventionally understood, was a notion you couldn't embrace?

To discuss this, we must insist on that definition of god -- as the word is conventionally understood. But yes, I can recall it. While I was growing up, I was regularly taken to a synagogue in Algiers, and there were aspects of Judaism I loved -- the music, for instance. Nonetheless, I started resisting religion as a young adolescent, not in the name of atheism, but because I found religion as it was practiced within my family to be fraught with misunderstanding. It struck me as thoughtless, just blind repetitions, and there was one thing in particular I found unacceptable: that was the way honors were dispersed. The honor of carrying and reading the Torah was auctioned off in the synagogue, and I found that terrible. Then when I was 13, I read Nietzsche for the first time, and though I didn't understand

him completely, he made a big impression on me. The diary I kept then was filled with quotations from Nietzsche and Rousseau, who was my other god at the time. Nietzsche objected violently to Rousseau, but I loved them both and wondered, how can I reconcile them both in me?

In an interview he gave shortly after World War II but ordered withheld from publication until after his death in 1976, Heidegger said, "Philosophy after Nietzsche could offer neither help nor hope for mankind's future. All we can do is wait for a god to reappear. Only a god can save us now." Do you agree?

I wouldn't use the term "a god," but what interests me in this statement is that Heidegger was anti-religious. He was raised Catholic, but he vehemently rejected Christianity, so the god he refers to is not the god we know. He refers to a god who not only hasn't come yet, but perhaps doesn't exist. He gives the name of god to the one who is hoped for, and implies that the one who'd come and save us will have the name of god. I don't agree with this if it encourages hope for salvation, but if the statement means that we're waiting for the arrival of an unpredictable one, and that we must be hospitable to the coming of this one, then I've got no objection. This is a form of what I'd describe as messianicity without messianism, and we are by nature messianic. We cannot not be, because we exist in a state of expecting something to happen. Even if we're in a state of hopelessness, a sense of expectation is an integral part of our relationship to time. Hopelessness is possible only because we do hope that some good, loving someone could come. If that's what Heidegger meant, then I agree with him.

Did you fear for your life as a child growing up during World War II?

No. My experience during the war was difficult, but it couldn't be compared with what happened to the Jews in Europe. There was terrible anti-Semitism in Algeria, but there were no Germans in the country, no concentration camps, no massive deportation of Jews. But the traumas occurred nonetheless. When you are expelled from school without understanding why, it marks you.

In Ron Rosenbaum's book of 1998, *Explaining Hitler*, he suggests that meaning itself was Hitler's ultimate victim, because coherent meaning cannot be found in the Holocaust. Do you agree?

I'll go very slowly here. I know there are philosophers who think that what was absolutely new in the genocide of the Holocaust was that it had no sacrificial structure. It was cold, rational, industrial, and it was given no sacrificial meaning. I'm not sure that's true. I'm not prepared to answer that question without a good deal more thought.

What are the central questions philosophy came into existence to answer?

First of all, how to handle one's life and live well together -- which is also politics. This is what was addressed in Greek philosophy, and from the beginning, philosophy and politics were deeply intertwined. We are living beings who believe we have the capacity to change life, and we place ourselves above other animals. I'm critical of the question of the animal and how it's treated in philosophy, but that's another issue. Still, we think we're not animals and that we have the ability to organize our lives. Philosophy poses the question: What should we do to have the best possible lives? I'm afraid we haven't made much progress in arriving at an answer to this question.

What's the difference between knowledge and wisdom?

They aren't heterogeneous, and you can know lots of things and have no wisdom at all. Between knowledge and action there is an abyss, but that abyss shouldn't prevent us from trying to know as much as possible before making a decision. Philosophy is the love of wisdom. *Philia* is love and *sophia* is wisdom, so the duty to be wise is what philosophy is. Nonetheless, decisions don't depend exclusively on knowledge. I try to know as much as possible before making a decision, but I know that at the moment of the decision I'll make a leap beyond knowledge.

Did arriving at the set of understandings you presented in your books of 1967 bring you greater happiness?

I wouldn't say it made me happier, but it gave me the strength to continue. I lead a very active, exhausting life, and if someone had told me when I was 20 that I'd be doing what I do now at the age of 72, I wouldn't have believed it. I was more physically fragile then, and I would've collapsed from doing a fraction of what I

do now. The reception of the work gives me this energy. People are generous with me and my work, and I'm sure I would collapse without that generosity.

Why aren't there any female philosophers?

Because the philosophical discourse is organized in a manner that marginalizes, suppresses and silences women, children, animals and slaves. This is the structure -- it would be stupid to deny it, and consequently there have been no great women philosophers. There have been great women thinkers, but philosophy is one very particular mode of thinking among other modes of thinking. But we're in a historical phase when things like this are changing.

Would you describe yourself as a feminist?

This is a huge problem, but in a way, yes. Much of my work has dealt with the deconstruction of phallogentrism, and if I may say this myself, I was one of the first to put this question at the center of the philosophical discourse. Of course I'm in favor of ending the repression of women, particularly as it's perpetuated in the philosophical groundings of phallogentrism, so in that regard I'm an ally of feminine culture. But that doesn't prevent me from having reservations about some manifestations of feminism. To simply invert the hierarchy, or for women to appropriate the most negative aspects of what's conventionally viewed as masculine behavior, benefits no one.

What's the most widely held misconception about you and your work?

That I'm a skeptical nihilist who doesn't believe in anything, who thinks nothing has meaning, and text has no meaning. That's stupid and utterly wrong, and only people who haven't read me say this. It's a misreading of my work that began 35 years ago, and it's difficult to destroy. I never said everything is linguistic and we're enclosed in language. In fact, I say the opposite, and the deconstruction of logocentrism was conceived to dismantle precisely this philosophy for which everything is language. Anyone who reads my work with attention understands that I insist on affirmation and faith, and that I'm full of respect for the texts I read.

With sufficient understanding of the Other, could the impulse to kill be erased?

The drive to kill will never be erased, because it's part of the human animal. The human animal has a capacity for cruelty, and to make the Other suffer can be a source of pleasure. That isn't eradicable, but it doesn't mean we have the right to kill -- and this is one of the crucial functions of philosophy and thinking, to handle this irreducible drive. Cruelty and aggression are always there, but they can be transformed into things that are beautiful and sublime. When I write, there's an element of aggression in that activity, but I attempt to transform that aggression into something useful. Aggression can be transformed into something more interesting than killing -- and of course, you can kill without killing. I can kill the Other without putting an end to his or her life, and can be aggressive in a way that's not despicable.

Concepts of territory and ownership seem to be at the root of much human conflict; where did these ideas originate, and why do we cling to them?

For many centuries, the city was a crucially important center of commerce, but with new technology that's no longer the case, and the politics of owning a place are different. Nevertheless, the place remains important. A friend of mine recently said there are two things today that can't be deterritorialized or virtualized: They are Jerusalem -- nobody wants virtual Jerusalem, they want to own the actual soil -- and the other thing is oil. The capitalistic nation states live on oil, and although that could be changed, the whole society would collapse if it did. That's why oil is a problem. It's more of a problem in America than it is in Europe, but we share the same concerns. Everything is always more in America, for obvious reasons.

Is the past more apt to be a source of pain or pleasure for people?

This differs from one person to the next, but I'm fortunate in that I have a happy relationship with the past -- I even keep happy memories of difficult parts of my life that I know were terrible. I'd like to repeat my life, and would accept that everything be repeated endlessly, exactly as it happened. The eternal return.

What's important to you today?

How can I answer such a question? Many things private, public and political are

important to me, but I think of all these things with a constant awareness that I'm aging, I'm going to die, and life is short. I'm constantly attentive to the time left to me, and although I've been inclined this way since I was young, it becomes more serious when you reach 72. So far I haven't made my peace with the inevitability of death, and I doubt I ever will, and this awareness permeates everything I think. It's terrible what's going on in the world, and all these things are on my mind, but they exist alongside this terror of my own death.

At what point did you become an adult?

This is an intriguing question. I've always believed everyone has more than one age, and I carry three ages within myself. When I was 20 I felt old and wise, but now I feel like a child. There's an element of melancholy to this, because although I feel young in my heart, I know objectively that I'm not young. The second age I carry is my real age of 72, and every day I'm confronted with signs that remind me of it. The third age I carry -- and this is something I only feel in France -- is the age I was when I began to publish, which was 35. It's as if I stopped at 35 in the cultural world where I work. Of course that's not true, because in many circles I'm considered an old, well-known professor who's published a lot. Nonetheless, I feel as though I'm a young writer who just started publishing, and people are saying, "Well, he's promising."