

Stunned: Derrida on Film

First, let me list a few facts about the film we are going to watch.¹ *D'ailleurs, Derrida* had its premier showing in Spring 2000 on the Franco-German public television station, Arte, which co-produced it. It was written and directed by Safaa Fathy, an Egyptian filmmaker, playwright, and poet who has long lived in Paris where she also studied for her doctorate in English. It has since been screened many times at film festivals, in commercial theaters, and at numerous conferences such as this one, very often in the presence of the film's director and/or its subject, Jacques Derrida. The film was shot in 1999 at various locations, very few of which are identified in the film itself.

These settings are often used as evocative visual backdrops for the foregrounded figure of Derrida, who is heard and often shown speaking throughout the film's sixty-eight minutes. The only other figure who speaks on camera is Derrida's friend, the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Occasionally one hears Fathy's faint voice off-camera posing a question, making a comment, or reading a passage, and once Marguerite Derrida is heard to speak, but otherwise it is Derrida's voice that fills the soundtrack, sharing it only with haunting airs of Arabo-Andalusian music or sounds of wind, birds, ocean, and sea.

The Mediterranean sea, along the coast of Algeria, at the port of Algiers, and on the southern coast of Spain, the Pacific ocean, seen from Laguna Beach in Southern California, are the most insistent visual presences alongside Derrida's. The film's editing tends to blend these coasts into a same shoreline along which advance and recede repeating crests of waves. Of these three coastal locations, two are strongly tied to Derrida's individual biography: on the one hand, his native city of Algiers, many images of which flash by intercut throughout the film, including sequences shot in and around Derrida's family home in El Biar, a suburb of Algiers; and, on the other hand or the other coast, the shore of Southern California near the campus of UC Irvine and not far

from the ruined Spanish mission at San Juan Capistrano, where like a migrating bird or a soaring pelican Derrida returned every spring for seventeen years to continue in English the seminar begun each year in Paris, in French. (The film records him teaching in both places, in both languages.) From all of the sequences shot in Algeria, Derrida is absent, the camera going from one site of memory to another accompanied only by his dislocated voice, which almost never identifies synchronically the images as they accumulate and are rapidly intercut: the waterfront in Algiers, with its arcades beneath which his father, René Derrida, worked, the Great Synagogue, which formerly had been a mosque and after Algeria's independence in 1962 was again converted back into a mosque, the Jardin d'Essai, Algiers' large botanical park, the cemetery in which small above-ground tombs recall the deaths of Derrida's two infant brothers, the narrow alleys of the Casbah, the Arab quarter of Algiers that Derrida knew well before it became virtually off-limits to the European inhabitants of the city, the courtyards of several schools that he attended in Paris and before that in his native city, one of which expelled him under the cover of Vichy's imitation of the Nazi regime's policy of "racial purification," and above all the house and the garden in El Biar, where Derrida grew up and to which he returned often until 1962, when it and almost everything in it had to be abandoned in the family's forced flight north across the Mediterranean. When it enters the same house in 1999, the camera uncovers improbable remnants of this abandonment: the mother's piano and above it the framed movie poster from Charlie Chaplin's 1921 silent film *The Kid*, showing Chaplin's character with a protective arm around the American boy actor Jackie Coogan, who played the eponymous kid.

Less improbable but no less moving is the glimpse we are given of the flaw in the geometric pattern of the villa's tile floor. As an interruption or accident befalling the floor's regular, repeating pattern, this single misplaced tile is something like the house's own signature or fingerprint, the mark of its undeniable identity as the house of Derrida's memory. In *Tourner les mots*, the book that Fathy and Derrida co-wrote to accompany the film's debut, Derrida lingers at greater length over this detail than any of the countless others he evokes in his recollection of the filming. The thought or image of the disadjusted tile plunges him deep into recollection of the years during which he daily trod upon it. At the same time, however, and under the same provocation, he takes up a meditation on the law that immediately metonymizes every irreplaceable singularity, for example, a particular flaw in the floor pattern of someone's childhood home, into a general structure of wounded memory, the infinitely repeatable event of a circumcision that Derrida here captures

in the idiomatic phrase, in French, of *une fois pour toutes*, once and for all. You have to watch for the single, very brief apparition on the screen of this detail, which, no more than most of the other images, is not explained or situated.

I have mentioned both the Algerian coast on the Mediterranean and the Southern California coast on the Pacific, both of which are prominently featured in the film. But there is also a third coastal location, which the film never explicitly situates or identifies. These sequences were shot on the southern coast of Spain, in the province of Almeria that lies to the east of Andalusia. The film opens and closes with shots filmed at this location, which I am able to name only because Safaa Fathy betrays their secret in *Tourner les mots*. As far as I know, it will have been the first and only time that Derrida ever set foot on this deserted terrain, which lies more or less due north from Algeria across the Mediterranean. In the film, however, he is frequently shown there traversing its empty landscape, utterly isolated by the camera's frame from all contact with a living thing except the oversized cacti that often fill the screen.

Another location in Spain is very important to the film's visuals and themes: the city of Toledo. Derrida is filmed walking its streets and through medieval courtyards as he evokes the significance for him of figures of the marrano, that is, those who remained behind, after the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1492, to continue in secret the practice of Jewish rites and observances. But it is also the Toledo of El Greco that the film features very centrally, with a long sequence shot before "The Burial of Count Orgaz," a painting that Derrida had evoked at length in *Circumfession*.

By omitting nearly all toponyms and other nominal or verbal devices for captioning the images, the film bids to place them in an unsettled and often unsettling relation to language. As a consequence, the images almost never illustrate a verbal picture (there are a few notable exceptions), nor does language ever supply an ekphrastic description of the image, even when the camera plays at length over the surface of El Greco's famous painting. At many points, the image track and the sound track seem to be parallel lines that do not touch, at least not in the conventional ways of the caption, the illustration, the commentary, ekphrasis, or even just the name. Through this *mise en parallèle*, word and image are both held in relation and divorced from each other; they are, in other words, articulated, held together/apart. In this and other ways, the listener/viewer is kept constantly alert not only to the texture and dimension of film, but also to its artifice as Derrida might have called it. Or simply, to its writing.

It is not, however, only the film's editing that maintains this alertness. The subject who is "captured" here, as we say, is repeatedly heard underscoring the film's operation and his role there. In an early sequence, shot on a balcony overlooking the Pacific, Derrida emphatically points off camera in the direction of the film's operators as he evokes the "text that *you* are going to write and sign. I am here," he continues, "like some raw material for your writing." This sequence functions something like an establishing shot for the entire film because it goes outside the frame and remarks it. Throughout this sequence, Derrida has been speaking about the finitude of writing, by which he means that

as soon as there is inscription, there is necessarily selection, and consequently, erasure, censoring, exclusion; whatever I may say now about writing . . . will be selective, finite, as marked by exclusion, silence, and the unsaid as by what I will say.²

Having thus called attention to the necessary selection limiting whatever he might say about anything, he points to the film's framing operation as an obvious example of writing as selection and effacement. The camera records whatever falls within its frame, but the film is written by cutting and splicing, deleting and selecting. Thus, the gesture toward the film's author or writer points in the direction of the highly compounded effect of effacement and censorship. It also gives clear warning to the viewer that, despite his appearing here himself or as himself, the one named "Derrida" is not this work's signatory or author; he is raw material deposited in the hands of others, his image and his speech turned over to them to make with it what they will.³

Even though this exchange of viewpoints takes place in the most pacific manner, there is a readable tension on its surface. By remarking his passivity as raw material, Derrida also, and with the same gesture, attempts to slip beyond it, to overturn it by verbally shooting the film's own writing. Indeed, intercut into the image of Derrida speaking are two spliced clips, very dark and grainy, in which we see members of the film crew on the same balcony, but as shot by Derrida with a little handheld camera. The film seems thereby to translate into images what its subject refers to, in the very next segment, as his impatient patience or patient impatience as he waits for the film crew to set up, test the sound equipment, determine the camera angles, and so forth. In this subsequent segment, a large aquarium fills the screen; numerous blue-colored fish slowly pass back and forth behind the head of the subject, who after turning to look at them, looks back toward the camera and says:

The impatience of fish; what I'm thinking about is the patience, the impatience of fish. These fish have been catalogued, imprisoned, put under glass

. . . I feel like a fish here, obligated to stand in front of the window, behind the window before a gaze. I am made to wait, the time, the time, the time it takes, the time it takes. . . It's the image of hell. . . Moreover, they are like me subjected, patiently, impatiently, to the wishes of the masters.

Throughout this sequence, one hears a drip, drip, drip of water, which in the prism of Derrida's commentary is slyly converted into an "image of hell," a prisoner's recollection of water torture. He compares himself to the imprisoned fish and when he elaborates this association by describing how he is "obligated to stand in [*figurer*] in front of the window, behind the window, before a gaze," his outspread hand is advanced palm first toward the camera and held there a moment as if pressed up against a glass division. We know from Fathy's descriptions in *Tourner les mots* that this sequence was shot on the first day of filming with Derrida on location, in the Musée des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris, and that, nothing having gone according to plan, the film's subject quickly became exasperated by the whole process. She writes that "when the camera stopped to change the film cartridge, or for any other reason, Derrida felt threatened, dispossessed, as if he had been abducted" (*Tourner*, 135).⁴ Impatient patience, patiently impatient: the subject is a patient who goes under the knife of the film's operators, an imprisoned animal patiently, impatiently turning round his cage while his movements are recorded by the turning camera.

The tension I am pointing to, however, is less between the subject Derrida and those who, by cutting and splicing, selecting and deleting, are writing the film that will bear his name in its title. It is rather a tension already between Derrida and himself, between someone who submits to the operation and someone who cannot bear to be patient or a patient. Derrida has a word for this implacable contrariness in *Circumfession*: he is or he gives, as he says several times, the *counterexample* of himself. Long passages of *Circumfession* are read aloud in the film. It is indeed, if I am not mistaken, the only work of Derrida's that the film quotes and excerpts. The last of these excerpts, which also supplies the last words spoken in the film, names the counterexample:

what I would have liked to announce . . . what you have to know before dying, i.e. that not only I do not know anyone, I have not met anyone, I have had in the history of humanity no idea of anyone, wait, wait, anyone who has been happier than I, and luckier, euphoric . . . drunk with uninterrupted enjoyment . . . but that if, beyond any comparison, I have remained, me *the counterexample of myself*, as constantly sad, deprived, destitute, disappointed, impatient, jealous, desperate, negative and neurotic, and that if in the end the two certainties do not exclude one another for I am sure they are as true as each other, simultaneously and from every angle . . . (*Circumfession*, 269–70)

This counterexemplarity is what any film titled “Derrida” has to try to bring within its frame, and not only through sequential juxtaposition, but as I just read, “simultaneously and from every angle.” In *Tourner les mots*, Fathy refers to the film’s extensive use of what she calls a *contre-champ*, a counter-field, whereby, for example, Derrida is shown slowly walking through a ruined house in a deserted location while on the soundtrack we hear him speaking about hospitality from the balcony in Laguna Beach, recognizable by the background sounds of waves crashing and seabirds calling. In the initial sequence, immediately following the opening titles, this technique of the counter-field is ushered in with a jump cut to the first shots in Algiers as we hear Derrida gloss his sense of the term “ailleurs.” The sequence begins once again with the ruined landscape, Derrida traversing it from screen right to screen left and looking broodingly toward the camera, while his voiceover speaks of crossing the limit toward an *ailleurs*, an elsewhere:

It is a matter of thinking from this limit-crossing. The *ailleurs*, even when it is very nearby, is always the beyond of some limit but [pause] in oneself, one has the limit in one’s heart [and on this phrase the image track jumps to a shot taken from a moving vehicle of a street scene with several women in white chadors and half-veiled faces in a crowd of passers-by], in one’s body, that is what the *ailleurs* means, the elsewhere is here. If the elsewhere were elsewhere, it would not be an elsewhere. [And with this last sentence, the image track jumps again to a vista out toward the sea as seen through a large public garden, which is not identified as the Jardin d’Essai in Algiers; in the foreground a man is leading a small boy down the steps into the garden. This segues to the next shot of Derrida emerging at the top of a long staircase at the bottom of which one sees a rocky beach and breaking waves.]

This principle of the counter-field, whereby a limit is traced and crossed between an elsewhere and a here, guides the editing of the film throughout, but it is not yet such a deliberate and well-known cinematic technique that captures (and I use the word advisedly) Derrida as counterexample of himself. To return for a moment to *Circumfession*, which provides something like the subtext or superscript of the film’s scenario, I will recall that the first of this text’s fifty-nine periods speaks of “a desire toward which all others since always seemed, confluence itself, to rush,” a confluent desire, therefore, that would gather into itself all conflicting or contrary ones, a single main artery of desire without counterexample. This arterial desire announces itself first with a phrase, which immediately suggests a sequence of images that come to the surface from a reserve of memory bathed in affect and sensation, fear and a wave of appeasement. The opening sequence of *Circumfession* thus reads like a film script, with image track and sound track on which

a three-word phrase would be spoken first in a ghostly, unidentified voiceover and then repeated by one of the actors in the scene who plays a nurse and who manipulates a complicated apparatus that draws his lifeblood from the child, now adult, remembering the scene:

a sentence came, from further away than I could ever say . . . the plural word of a desire toward which all the others since always seemed, confluence itself, to rush, an order suspended on three words, *find the vein* [trouver la veine], what a nurse might murmur, syringe in hand, needle upward, before *taking blood* [la prise de sang], when for example in my childhood, and I remember that laboratory in the rue d'Alger, the fear and vagueness of a glorious appeasement that both took hold of me, took me blind in their arms at the precise moment at which by the point of the syringe there was established an invisible passage, always invisible, for the continuous flowing of blood, absolute, absolved in the sense that nothing seemed to come between the source and the mouth, the quite complicated apparatus of the syringe being introduced in that place only to allow the passage and to disappear as instrument, but continuous in that other sense that, without the now brutal intervention of the other who, deciding to interrupt the flow once the syringe, still upright, was withdrawn from the body . . . the blood could still have flooded, not indefinitely but continuously to the point of exhausting me, thus aspiring toward it what I called: the glorious appeasement (*Circumfession*, 6–8)

Almost every detail of this flowing, flickering passage could pertain to the description of any film titled *Derrida*, or *D'ailleurs, Derrida*, more precisely to the making or taking of such a film. Its subject is held, blind, between the two arms of fear, which makes him impatient, and its appeasing dissolution, the promise awaiting his passivity and patience. A surrender, then, into the hands of others who wield a complicated apparatus for *prises de vue* and *prises de son*, that is, for camera shots and takes, for sound recording, here imaged as a *prise de sang*, but one that would be absolute and absolved “in the sense that nothing seemed to come between the source and the mouth,” the river of confessed, expressed lifeblood flowing without stopping or stoppering in labeled tubes like so many reels of film in their cans. It is desire’s own impossible scenario, its life drive as death drive undecidably, but impossible also in the sense that it dissolves the possibility for any subject to say “I can,” I can take or make my own self-portrait and be absolved of everything not shown or said there. Impossible because it is the other who must decide to interrupt the flow, it is always the other in me, without me, who decides, and therefore who says me and shows me: “without the now brutal intervention of the other who, deciding to interrupt the flow . . . the blood could still have flooded, not indefinitely but continuously to the point of exhausting me.”

At this point, we could cut to another scene or scenario, in other words, another text, the one Derrida titled “Lettres on a Blind Man: *Punctum caecum*,” in *Tourner les mots*, which begins:

Thus, lowering my guard, even before having decided to do so, even before having turned around, I will have let myself be surprised. . . . Never have I consented to that point. Yet never has the consent been as uneasy, as little and as poorly feigned, painfully estranged from complacency, simply powerless to say “no.” . . . Never, as if in full knowledge, have I acted so much like a blind man, eyes closed upon a command that dictated: “At this point, to this point, on this date, you must give up keeping back, and keeping yourself, and keeping watch on yourself Accept hypnosis, yes, hypnosis. . . .” The decision could not have been my own. Assuming that it ever has been.

Never have I been so passive, at bottom, never have I let myself be pushed around, and directed, to that point. How did I let myself be surprised to that point, at that point, so imprudently? (*Tourner*, 73)

À ce point: the repeated phrase both points to the blind point, the *punctum caecum*, that he occupied as the object of the camera’s gaze and at the same time, it qualifies an intensity of the experience of having accepted his blindness, as if in full knowledge, to a point much greater than ever before, in a manner so thoroughly against his customary vigilance. “Whereas I have always been, at least I believe I am very on guard, and I give warning that I am on guard—against this kind of imprudent or improvident situation (photography, improvised interview, the impromptu, camera, microphone, the public space itself, etc.)” (ibid.). Writing after having seen the finished film, on which he will offer absorbing and absorbed commentary, Derrida is surprised by how he was surprised, stunned by how he was stunned, sees then not so much what he did not see, but *that* he did not see. Both Derrida and Fathy, the former more discreetly, the latter more fully, acknowledge that the filming of *D’ailleurs, Derrida* was an ongoing and at times explosive struggle between the two of them, and that the filmmaker had repeatedly to tell her subject that he did not see, he could not see, was unable to see. Although none would have had fuller knowledge of this necessary blind spot than the author of *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, none, as well, would have better seen, or rather understood that such knowledge was for nothing in the event as it happened: “No anticipation,” writes Derrida a little further in “Letters on a Blind Man,” “was able to prevent that all this happened to me, in fact, and happened to me without my seeing anything.” (*Tourner*, 76). Concerning the shot of the blind man, filmed on a street corner in Toledo, Derrida confesses his admiration and remarks: “I never saw him, the blind man, while this was being shot, and now, a long time after

the shooting, I discover him in a film of which I will remain the stunned Spectator [*le Spectateur ahuri*] . . . in a film in which I was the blind and largely unconscious Actor” (*Turner*, 82).

But in case one is tempted to take this anonymous blind man as a figure, metaphor, or allegory for the film’s subject, that is, himself, Derrida scatters the cards by insisting that (a) the blind man is but one such figure, there are many others, (b) they are each time figures for the film and for every position in relation to the film (Actor, Spectator, Technicians, Author, Editor, etc.) and (c) that the figure in question is neither metaphor nor allegory but rather metonymy. Or as Derrida will prefer to say in common, everyday French, and only in French, these figures are all “*une fois pour toutes*.” I translate this passage but repeat many words in the original:

And *each time, chaque fois*, it is *at once, à la fois* a figure among others, and a figure *once and for all, une fois pour toutes*. A figure that says it all, *qui dit tout*, even as it says only a part of the whole, *tout en ne disant qu’une partie du tout*. What I have just remarked about the blind man (one figure among others but that is valid *une fois pour toutes* . . .) could be referred to other metonymies of the film. For example, *visual images of things*: the ruin, the cat, the ladder or the staircase, the automobile, the floor tile, the mailbox, etc., or to *more discursive figures*, circumcision, excision, hospitality, forgiveness, sexual differences, and so forth. And if a metonymy cuts up a corpus or a body, if it plays between the whole and the part, the latter detaching from the former in order to take its place either by delegation or substitution, well then, circumcision is not just one metonymy among others. It is the metonymy of metonymy, the very play of the film. But there you are, it must be possible to say this about all metonymies—that of the blind man *once and for all, une fois pour toutes* and among others. (*Turner*, 82)

The blind man, or any of the other figures, whether images of things or discursive figures, *at once* happens only *once*, this blind man on that day reading a certain book in Braille on that street corner in Toledo, and immediately *for all*, immediately detached from the singularity of its event; it stands in for all others, it immediately begins to repeat and replace itself, represent and reproduce itself: *une fois pour toutes*.

Here, at this point, we can rejoin and cut again to Derrida’s counterexemplarity, to that which allows him to say of himself that he will have been both the happiest of mortals and the most constantly sad, deprived, and desperate. Read out as Derrida’s figure retreats into the background of the blasted Almerian landscape, these final words of the film confess the *une fois pour toutes* as the very principle of the counterexample. As he puts it in *Turner les mots*, there is no exit from the counterexemplarity of the “once and for all”:

this event, the time of what is happening (one time, one time only) is given immediately as *irreversible*, and that is what matters to me: that is what causes me both joy and anguish. . . . this unique event will not happen again, the thing will return no more, it is finished, finite. . . . But, surprise, the “for all” gives one also to understand, right away, without waiting, the contrary: this time stands already for all the others, it replaces them in advance . . . And there, once again, double source of joy and anxiety, double mourning and mourning of mourning: nothing is lost, nothing is irreversible, everything returns (“eternal return”), but inversely, we are already in the midst of substitution, singularity is seen being lost sight of, one loses what one gains. Reversibility procures a joy that is as unbearable as irreversibility. Another way of saying, *une fois pour toutes*, that joy seems as unbearably joyful as non-joy. There is no exit from this. That is what all the metonymies, all the “*une fois pour toutes*” of Safaa Fathy’s film “would mean to say.” (*Tourner*, 83–4)

It is time to conclude, and I will do so very briefly, elliptically, for, after all, you are going to watch and hear the film’s metonymical operations for yourselves. I will leave you with just two watchwords, the one having to do with the words you will hear and the other with the images you will watch.

First the words. As I have already noted, during one of the sequences shot in Toledo, Derrida is asked to say something about the significance of the figure of the *marrano* for him, and his response, which will move quickly into a discussion of the broader concept of secrecy, begins with a remark on the word *marrane*: “If I have fallen in love with this word,” he says, “which has become a kind of obsession in all my recent texts . . .” The remark made in passing reveals Derrida as someone who can say of himself, un-self-consciously and in all seriousness, that he is capable of falling in love with words, not with words in general, but one at a time, particular words. So the first watchword I will leave you with would be to listen for this word-lover and perhaps as well, to ask yourselves as you listen and watch: how can a film film words, the love of words, or the experience of falling in love with a word? How can it, in other words and in the other language, *tourner les mots*, film words? For if Jacques Derrida is a worthy subject for a film, it is because not only has he been capable of that experience but he has communicated it, countless times, in his writings. He did so most directly, perhaps, in an elided part of that passage from *Circumfession* that supplies the already-cited last words of the film. In Geoffrey Bennington’s remarkable translation, here are some of the lines that were elided:

this morning it seems to me I am seeing a word, “cascade,” for the first time, as happens to me so often, and each time it’s the birth of a love affair, the

origin of the earth, without counting the fact that the 52+7 and a few times that I have thought I was, like a cascade, falling in love, I began to love each word again, so many words like clean proper names, but the word cascade, you see, itself, I do not see, it falls under my eyes, have you ever seen a word, what's called seen, however long you turn around it, and how to bring off a confession, how to look at yourself right in the eyes and show your face if a word is never seen face on, not even the word *milah*, for "word." (*Circumfession*, 266–7)

The second watchword is an image to watch for. It passes very quickly, in a shadowy background. I do not think I ever saw it the first few times I watched this film. It is the image of a cat, but not the Siamese cat that is alone on screen for several seconds and that Derrida mentions as one of the film's possible metonymies. In *Tourner les mots*, Derrida says that this featured cat reminds him of Lucrèce, one of the cats that long lived with his family, a Siamese whom I met several times and who is buried in the garden of Derrida's home in Ris-Orangis (and the film shows us the burial place). The apparition of this cat in a street of Toledo, observes Derrida, is like a return of the ghost of Lucrèce. The image of this ghostly cat plays over the remarks about the marrano, and secrecy. But in his later commentary on this and his other chosen metonymies in *Tourner les mots*, Derrida never lets on whether or not he noticed how, as this sequence continues, when it cuts back to his own image on screen, another cat, out of focus in the background, climbs out of a window that can be seen over his right shoulder. This other cat pauses a moment on the threshold as if to take in the whole scene, and then jumps down and out of the shot. It all happens behind Derrida's back, silently, so it draws no commentary either in the film or in the commentary later in the book. Unless we may take this chance, unscripted, unpredictable event as a visual metonymy for what Derrida can then be heard saying about secrecy, about a secret that is secret even from its bearer, having been forgotten and become invisible over time: "it's as if I were," Derrida says, "a marrano of the marrano, a centuries-old marrano . . ." Or as if he were the stunned spectator at a film bearing his name, who can no more see what others do than he can see the silent cat leaping down behind his back.

Notes

1. This essay began as introductory remarks to a screening of *D'ailleurs, Derrida* (dir. Safaa Fathy, 2000) at a memorial conference organized at Georgetown University in March 2005 by Roger-Daniel Bensky and Deborah Lesko Baker.

2. Safaa Fathy, *D'Ailleurs, Derrida* © Gloria Films Production/La Sept Arte—France 1999. All translations from the soundtrack are my own.
3. See also *Turner*, 79.
4. All translations from this work are my own.