

"Impossible Confession: A Review of 'Derrida's Elsewhere'"

In "Derrida's Elsewhere" filmmaker, Safaa Fathy, resists the impossible task of trying to make sense of Derrida's thought by simply giving us a biographical account of Derrida's life. Instead her art resides in letting Derrida speak to that impossibility: a filmed confession about his life in which the meaning of its full disclosure remains as elusive as the expression of any motif Derrida has sought to explore in his writings. The only difference is that his life, in this instance, is made the object of his subjective gaze, and the tissue of that relation exists as material for the eye of Fathy's camera. The result is a retrospective glimpse into the complex relation between the man and his thought, or what amounts to Derrida's reflections on the question of autobiography.

Against the backdrop of seeing Derrida in his personal space—at home, in a post-colonial museum, lecturing at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, leading a seminar at Cornell University, or visiting the tomb of a prison where he might have been detained—Fathy seeks to show a link between the theme of "elsewhere" that runs through Derrida's work and the places, past and present, that may have left their mark on the character of the man. With this, Derrida at times seems uneasy before the camera. His eyes search beyond the lens, as if wary of an audience that might make an impatient link between his image and his narrative. His resistance becomes evident when at one point, positioned in front of an aquarium, he remarks: "I feel like a fish here forced to appear in front of the glass, behind the glass, stared at. . . They're like me, subjected to the whims of their masters." It is in the tension between impatience and resistance that Derrida confesses to an identity that is made possible by his being essentially inexistent.

The most striking feature of the film, perhaps, is the movement between levels of thought and place: we are made to follow Derrida from one place to another, and when he stops to reflect, his thought moves from one theme to another, in order to share the significance of a certain place for him, leaving any sense we might have of him lost in the tapestry of his discourse. For Derrida the movement signifies a life long search for his identity, for the "me" that is not simply here, hence, not "me" now and before you, but elsewhere. The contexts of elsewhere such as personal identity, history, religion, hospitality, sexuality, and reconciliation are threaded together by his notion of political responsibility. "If you are not constantly analyzing yourself," he says, "if you don't deal with the unconscious well, your exercise of political responsibility will suffer." That is, the more radical, or self-critical the analysis, the less violent will be the consequences of a life with others. Derrida seems to have spent a career and most of his adult life assuming that responsibility.

In "Derrida's Elsewhere, " then, we discover that to "know" Derrida is to find him beyond the image of his immediate presence yet nearer to us than any theme or idea he may choose to discuss. He is most present to us at the moment we acknowledge that our sense of him remains veiled. If "Derrida's Elsewhere" confesses anything, it is that Derrida can be found neither here nor there but always somewhere, in the wanderings between place and thought. And neither Fathy nor Derrida would have it any other way.

Reviewed by Rex Olson