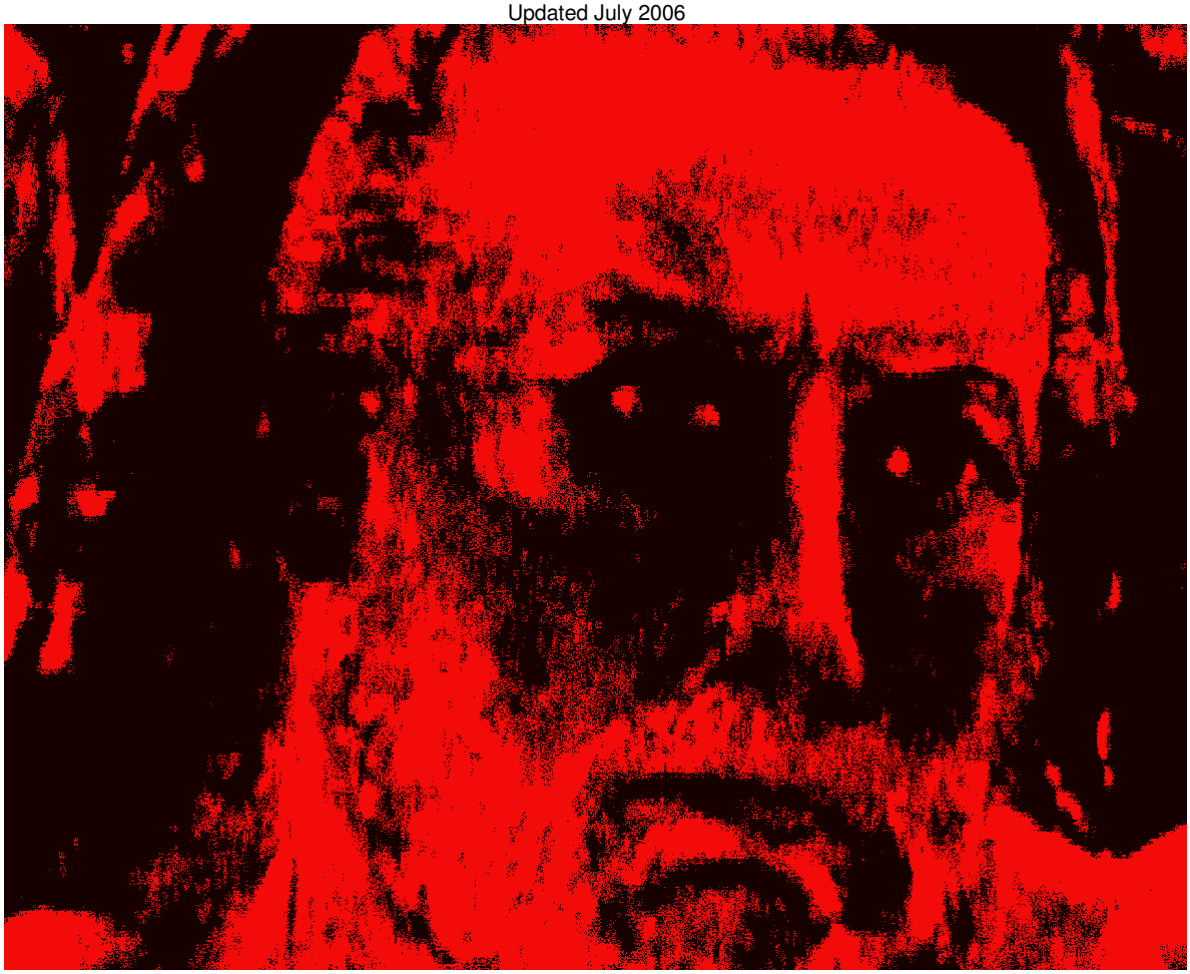
Updated July 2006



THE ISTER

INFORMATION KIT

"a philosophical feast - at which it is possible to gorge oneself yet leave feeling elated"
Scott Foundas, Variety

***** Prix GNCR *****
(Groupement National des Cinémas de Recherche/French National Association of Research Cinemas), Marseille International Documentary Film Festival, 'FIDMarseille' 2004

*****Quebec Film Critics Award *****
Montreal Festival of Nouveau Cinema 2004

PLEASE NOTE **IMAGE GALLERY** ONLINE
(hi-res images for publication): http://www.theister.com/mediakit

Contact: David Barison (Co-Director/Producer)
Email: mailto:davidbarison@theister.com **URL:** http://www.theister.com/
Phone: (International) +61 431 905 411 (Australia) 0431 905 411
Mail: David Barison c/o Black Box Sound and Image, 4 John St Fitzroy 3065 Australia

Synopsis

'The Ister' is a 3000km journey to the heart of Europe, from the mouth of the Danube river at the Black Sea, to its source in the German Black Forest. The film is based on the work of the most influential and controversial philosopher of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger, who swore allegiance to the National Socialists in 1933. By marrying a vast philosophical narrative with an epic voyage up Europe's greatest waterway, the film invites the viewer to unravel the extraordinary past and future of 'the West.'

Prizes

***** Prix GNCR *****
(Groupement National des Cinémas de Recherche/French National Association of Research Cinemas)
Marseille International Documentary Film Festival,
'FIDMarseille' 2004

*****Quebec Film Critics Award *****
Montreal Festival of Nouveau Cinema 2004

Theatrical, festival & TV screenings

Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Contemporary Art Museum touring festival	March-April 2007
Melbourne Cinematheque, Australia	July 2007
National Gallery of Art, Washington, USA	Saturday July 8 2006
Critical Positions festival , Brighton, UK	Sunday 18 June 2006
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK	Thursday 15 June & Saturday 17 Jun 2006
University of Strasbourg, France Screening as part of the International Association of Philosophy and Literature conference	Friday 9 June 2006
Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana USA	April 20, 2006
New York City: Anthology Film Archives cinema	April 13-16, 2006
Chicago: Gene Siskel Film Centre	February 17 & 20, 2006
San Francisco Bay area: California Film Institute, Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center	March 10 -17, 2006
USA THEATRICAL PREMIERE New York City: Anthology Film Archives	February 10-17
University of the Arts London, Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, UK, Discussion with Director David Barison to follow screening	4 February 2006
Austrian Film Museum, Vienna, Austria	26 January 2006
Sydney University, Heidegger and the Aesthetics of Living conference Discussion with Directors David Barison and Daniel Ross to follow screening	13-14 December, 2005
Maison Franco-Japonaise, Tokyo, Japan Screening: 3pm, Round Table Discussion: 7pm « Constituting Europe » Bernard STIEGLER (Directeur de l'IRCAM), WATANABE Moriaki (Professeur émérite, Univ. de Tokyo), NISHITANI Osamu (Univ. des Langues étrangères de Tokyo), ISHIDA Hidetaka (Univ. de Tokyo) Conducted in French and Japanese with simultaneous translation	19 December 2006
New Zealand Film Archive, Wellington, New Zealand	26 November 2005
Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA	1 October 2005
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK	5, 6 October 2005
doclisboa, 3rd Lisbon International Documentary Film Festival, Portugal	15-23 October, 2005
International Cinema, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah Campus, USA	18-22 October 2005
Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA	21 October 2005
Rice Cinema, Rice University, Houston, Texas,	9-11 September 2005
DOCNZ, International Documentary Film Festival New Zealand, Auckland	September 2005
Mercury Cinema, Adelaide	3 September 2005
Miami Art Central, Florida: Summerfest 2005,	Friday, July 15, 7:30 pm
European College of Liberal Arts, Berlin, State of the World Week	May 9-13 2005
WaterWays 2005 Conference - Confluence of Art, Science, Policy, &	April 21 2005

Philosophy - University of North Texas	
The Heidegger Symposium - University of Dallas	April 2005
Ireland: Australian Film Festival, Dublin	Sunday 24 April 2005
INTERNATIONAL TELEVISION PREMIERE YLE Teema, Finland	April 8, 2005
Minneapolis - St Paul International Film Festival	April 1-16 2005
E Tudo Verdade 2005 / It´s All True 10th Internatonal Documentary Festival Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro	29 March-10 April, 2005
Australian National University, Canberra, Symposium on Philosophy and Film	April 1, 2005
London Australian Film Festival	February, 2005
.mov :: International Digital Film Festival 2005, Philippines	February, 2005
28th Portland International Film Festival,	February 11-26, 2005
Mexico City International Contemporary Film Festival,	February 2005
UNITED STATES PREMIERE New York: Film Comment Selects series, Lincoln Center	February 13, 2005
Adelaide Film Festival,	February-March 2005
FRENCH PREMIERE Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Screening (6.00pm) followed by discussion with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy and Bernard Stiegler	January 26, 2005
Docpoint Helsinki Documentary Film Festival	January 12-16, 2005
Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy conference,	December 2004
PRIZE AWARDED Montreal International Festival New Cinema New Media (FCMM) Received Prize: Association of Quebec Film Critics, Best Film	October 2004
UK THEATRICAL SEASON Institute of Contemporary Art, London	September 24-October 7, 2004
Vancouver International Film Festival	September 2004
Collegium Phaenomenologicum, Citta di Castello, Italy	August 2004
Anonimul International Independent Film Festival (Romania)	August 2004
Centre for Ideas, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne	August 2004
Brisbane International Film Festival	July-August 2004
Melbourne International Film Festival	July-August 2004
PRIZE AWARDED Marseille International Documentary Festival Received Prize: 'Le Prix du Groupement National des Cinémas de Recherche (GNCR)'	July 2004
Filmfest Munich	June-July 2004
Sydney International Film Festival	June 2004
Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema	April 2004
WORLD PREMIERE: International Film Festival Rotterdam	January 2004

Media comment

"a philosophical feast - at which it is possible to gorge oneself yet leave feeling elated"
Scott Foundas, Variety

"A gripping philosophical journey"
Cahiers du Cinema

"An impressive philosophical exercise and a meditative work of cinematic beauty."
Jamie Russell, *BBCi*

"a rich, dense and exhilarating series of connections, arguments and ambiguities… a documentary with a sense of immediacy and inquiry, a film about past and present that makes use of cinema's power of associations, its ability to show the tangible, material aspect of things."
The Age

"The Ister has been playing to packed houses everywhere from Rotterdam to Sydney and Melbourne. Few people have seen anything like it before"
The Australian

"a layered and rigorous meditation on place and ethics that is strangely affirming"
Time Out

"the find of the festival"
Olaf Möller, *Film Comment* (Rotterdam festival 2004 overview)

"Pitching itself somewhere new between Chris Marker and Terrence Malick, *The Ister* is a 'positively un-Australian' classic."
Adrian Martin, Brisbane International Film Festival

"The film demands a lot from the spectator, but it's worth it, because much insight is provided into the fascinating thoughts of Heidegger and into the foundations of Western civilisation"
International Film Festival Rotterdam, 2004

"Magic"
*Südddeutsche Zeitung (South G*erman daily - 29 June 2004)

Introduction

At the height of World War Two, the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century delivered a series of lectures on a poem about the Danube river, by one of Germany's greatest poets.

The philosopher was Martin Heidegger, who in 1927 achieved worldwide fame with his *magnum opus*, *Being and Time*. Heidegger embraced the National Socialist 'revolution' in 1933, becoming rector of Freiburg University. His inaugural address culminated in 'Heil Hitler!'

After clashing with the Nazi bureaucracy, he resigned the rectorate in 1934. Nine years later, as the tide of the war was turning against Germany, Heidegger spent the summer semester lecturing on the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin. He focused on a poem about the Danube known as 'The Ister.' Rather than an esoteric retreat into the world of poetry, Heidegger's lectures were a direct confrontation with the political, cultural and military chaos facing Germany and the world in 1942, a time the philosopher characterised in his lectures as "the stellar hour of our commencement." The poem in question began with the lines:

Now come fire!
Eager are we
To see the day

The film *The Ister* takes up some of the most challenging paths in Heidegger's thought, as we journey from the mouth of the Danube river in Romania to its source in the Black Forest. However controversial Heidegger continues to be, his thought remains alive in the work of some of the most remarkable thinkers and artists working today. Four of these conduct our voyage upstream along the Danube: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler, and, finally, the filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

Winding through the shattered remains of the former Yugoslavia, through a Hungary busily restoring its national mythology, and through a Germany that is both the heart of the new Europe and the ghost of the old one, the Danube itself *is* the question of the film.

By drawing the places and times of the river into a constellation with Heidegger's thought, the film invites the viewer to participate in some of the most provocative questions facing Europe and the world today. These questions - of home and place, culture and memory, of technology and ecology, of politics and war - beckon us now as they did Heidegger in 1942.

Key figures

Martin Heidegger

Born in 1889, Martin Heidegger is the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century. After an apprenticeship with the Jewish philosopher Edmund Husserl, Heidegger in 1927 published his magnum opus, *Being and Time*. This work set out to retrieve the 'question of being,' forgotten since before the time of Plato. It was a profound exploration of the essence of humanity. In 1933 Heidegger embraced the National Socialist 'revolution,' becoming rector of Freiburg University. His 'rectorate address,' culminating in 'Heil Hitler!' is the most infamous stain in the history of philosophy. Disillusioned with the movement, Heidegger resigned the rectorate in 1934. He continued to lecture, turning more and more to close examination of ancient Greek texts, and to the 'poet of poets,' Friedrich Hölderlin. Heidegger was banned from teaching by the occupying forces after the war because of his Nazi affiliation. One preoccupation of his later writings is the meaning of modern technology, and at one point he controversially stated that mass exterminations are in essence the same as modern agriculture. He died in 1976.

Friedrich Hölderlin

Born in 1770, Friedrich Hölderlin has come to be regarded as one of the greatest poets in the German language. He was a friend of Hegel and Schelling, and his poetry reflects a preoccupation with philosophical themes, as well as a profound consideration of the meaning of ancient Greek culture, and its significance in modern times. Hölderlin was not heralded in his lifetime, and he was consequently forced to work as a tutor in bourgeois households. His mental condition deteriorated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, although he continued to write poetry, and completed translations of two of Sophocles' tragedies, *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The unfinished Ister hymn was written around 1803. When his health continued to suffer, and after a period of institutionalisation, Hölderlin moved into the home of a carpenter in Tübingen, where he lived from 1807 until his death in 1843.

The 1942 lecture course: Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'

1942 was the year the National Socialists settled on the 'final solution.' In that same year Heidegger delivered a lecture course on a poem by Friedrich Hölderlin about the Danube river entitled 'The Ister.' The course explored the meaning of poetry, the nature of technology, the relationship between ancient Greece and modern Germany, the essence of politics and human dwelling. The middle part of the lecture course is a reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which Heidegger undertakes because of the importance of this text for grasping the meaning of Hölderlin's poetry. The 1942 lecture course contains Heidegger's most sustained discussion of the essence of politics. Heidegger was only able to deliver two-thirds of the written text of the lecture course. It was published as part of his collected works in 1984.

Bernard Stiegler

Born in 1952, Bernard Stiegler spent five years in prison in France for armed robbery. During this period of enforced isolation, he became a philosopher. He was released from prison in 1983. In 1994 he published the first volume of his magnum opus, *Technics and Time*. The work was an examination of the essence of humanity in its relation to the essence of technology. On the one hand, Stiegler is engaged in an argument about archaeology and the history of technology. On the other hand, he is engaged in an argument with Heidegger about the nature of the human, the nature of memory, and the meaning of mortality. Although profoundly indebted to Heidegger, Stiegler argues that Heidegger cannot grasp the way in which man is originally and profoundly *technical life*, for whom all access to the past and all knowledge of death springs from a relation to technical *prostheses*.

Jean-Luc Nancy

Born in 1940, Jean-Luc Nancy has published on a vast variety of themes from philosophy, literature and art. In the 1970s he was a frequent collaborator with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and in 1980 they jointly opened the 'Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political' in Paris, the goal of which was to encourage philosophical work on the essence of politics. Nancy, a close associate of Jacques Derrida, has been the subject of a recent book by him. Nancy has continued to publish works that try to push 'deconstruction' toward a new foundation for political thought. In this project, he has been concerned with themes such as community and the possibility of founding politics on something other than identity. The work of Heidegger has been of great importance for Nancy's work, both positively and as what must be overcome.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe

Born in 1940, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe is another close associate of Jacques Derrida. As mentioned above, he was a collaborator with Nancy, writing books together and jointly opening the 'Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political' at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. In 1987 Lacoue-Labarthe published *La fiction du politique*, containing the results of his passionate wrestling with the problem of 'Heidegger's politics.' It is considered by many to be the most thoughtful and the most innovative work on the theme of Heidegger and Nazism. Lacoue-Labarthe turns back to Hölderlin in this work, in an attempt to find new terms with which to grasp the meaning of the extermination of the Jews. Lacoue-Labarthe has also published French translations of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, and has staged theatrical productions of these works.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg was born in Pomerania in 1935. After the collapse of Nazism he found himself in East Germany. He began making films as a teenager, and at the age of 17 he filmed rehearsals of Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble theatre company with an 8-millimetre camera in East Berlin. He migrated to West Germany in 1953, and has thus experienced life under Nazism, Stalinism and capitalism. Syberberg's greatest cinematic work is a 7-hour epic that appeared in 1977 under the title *Hitler: A Film From Germany*. An impossible mixture of Wagnerian mythology and Brechtian alienation, the film tries to enter into the Hitler phenomenon in order to grasp it from the inside. It was not well received in Germany, where it was controversial, but garnered praise overseas, especially from critics such as Susan Sontag. Suspicion of Syberberg's politics was inflamed when in the wake of reunification he published a book critical of modern Germany. Lacoue-Labarthe, who had cited the *Hitler* film favourably in *La fiction du politique*, was among those who subsequently found Syberberg's politics unacceptable. Syberberg continues with various artistic projects, including a stage production of Hölderlin poems in 1993 in Berlin.

Syberberg's website: www.syberberg.de

Directors: Biography/Filmography

David Barison

David Barison was born in Melbourne in 1972. At the age of 13 he collaborated on his first moving picture, a video explaining accidents in the home from a scientific perspective. Later he met Daniel Ross in the hallway of the Old Arts building. Their first conversation concerned Aristotle's proposition that 'the wise should rule'. Concerned that he would starve as a philosopher, David later turned to the study of politics and public relations. After seeing Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror* in 1995, David renounced the public relations and returned to moving pictures. *The Ister* is his first film.

Daniel Ross

Daniel Ross has completed a PhD dissertation on Martin Heidegger. He is the author of *Violent Democracy*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2004. *The Ister* is his first film.

Credits

Title:	The Ister
Country of Production:	Australia
Year of Production:	2004
Format:	Video - Digital Betacam
Length:	189 minutes with intermission (Part 1: 102 minutes) (Part 2: 87 minutes)
Language/subtitles	French and English (also some German and Croatian) with English subtitles
Directors:	David Barison and Daniel Ross
Production company:	Black Box Sound and Image, 4 John St, Fitzroy, 3065 Australia Email: davidbarison@theister.com Tel. +61 431 905 411 (International) 0431 905 411 (Australia)
Producers:	David Barison and Daniel Ross
Sales company:	Black Box Sound and Image 4 John St Fitzroy 3065 Email: davidbarison@theister.com Phone: (International) +61 431 905 411 (Australia) 0431 905 411
Print source:	Black Box Sound and Image
Camera:	David Barison and Daniel Ross
Sound Design:	David Barison and Daniel Ross
Sound Editor:	Livia Ruzic
Sound Mixer and Engineer:	Frank Lipson
Music:	Anton Bruckner, Franz Schubert, Richard Wagner. Naxos recordings used with permission.
Featuring:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler.
Note:	Filmed in France, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Yugoslavia, Romania 2000/2002

Media Comment - extended

October 2004

The Ister
(Docu -- Australia)

By SCOTT FOUNDAS

Life is a long, but hardly quiet river in "The Ister," in which a trip up the Danube gives way to an expansive journey of ideas about the evolution of Mankind and the development of Western civilization. TyroTyro helmers David Barison and Daniel Ross have sunk their teeth into a heady intellectual stew, and results are invigorating thanks to the filmmakers' inspired linkage of images and ideas and commentaries from three of the world's leading philosophers. Already a veteran of major festivals, "The Ister" deserves a shot at specialized theatricaltheatrical bookings, though tube airings will likely be more plentiful.

Pic's title derives from the ancient Greek name for the Danube, subsequently chosen by late-18th-century German poet Fridrich Holderlin as the title for his poem about the river.

In 1942, that poem became the basis of a lecture course delivered by Martin Heidegger at Germany's Freiburg U., which in turn has been cited by Barison and Ross as the impetus for their film.

However, much as Heidegger declined to interpret Holderlin's poetry for his students, so "The Ister" is a film driven more by the notion of exploration than explanation, with Heidegger's voice ultimately but one in the film's sometimes harmonious, sometimes cacophonous ideological chorus.

Starting at the Romanian mouth of the Danube, pic -- some five years in the making -- gradually winds its way along the nearly 3,000-kilometer path back to the river's source, near Germany's Black Forest. And at each step of the trek, Barison and Ross employ a who's who of contemporary thinkers as tour guides.

Among them is "Technics and Time" author Bernard Stiegler, who engagingly recounts the story of Prometheus, with fire giving rise to the contentious marriage of man and technology. As we journey further upriver, into the bombed-out cities of the former Yugoslavia and the skeletal concentration camp at Mauthausen, "The Ister" sees fit to remind us of some of the more troubling achievements of technical-age man.

Barison and Ross log considerable face time with Jacques Derrida associates Jean-Luc Nancy (whose autobiographical "L'Intrus" served as the inspiration for Claire Denis' recent pic of the same name) and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who collectively help further the pic's discussion of the relationship between technology and politics, culminating in an explicit confrontation of Heidegger's own infamous claim that mass human exterminations like the Holocaust are but an inevitable byproduct of industrialized agriculture.

In pic's final stretch, controversial German filmmaker Hans-Jurgen Syberberg (the seven-hour "Our Hitler") takes the reins, leading the filmmakers to the Danube's source and beyond as he contemplates the difficulty by which art and artists attempt to represent history.

Presiding over such a philosophical feast -- at which it is possible to gorge oneself yet leave feeling elated -- Barison and Ross rightly minimize their own presence in the film. Instead, they focus their energies on pic's impressive visual design, which wonderfully pairs images captured along the way (in crisp, color-saturated digital video) to ideas being discussed onscreen.

If it is possible for a film such as "The Ister" to have a star, it would have to be Stiegler, whose convulsive energy and tufts of mad-professor hair jutting out from his balding head lend pic a special energy whenever he's onscreen (which is quite often). That, combined with the fact Stiegler began his career as an armed robber before turning to philosophy suggests he may be a subject worthy of his own film study somewhere down the road.

Camera (color, DV), Barison, Ross; sound, Frank Lipson. Reviewed on DVD, Los Angeles, Sept. 21, 2004. (In Melbourne, Brisbane, Vancouver film festivals.) Running time: 189 MIN.

The New York Times

February 10, 2006
MOVIE REVIEW | 'THE ISTER'

A Journey Up the Danube, Philosophy Included

By NATHAN LEE

"The Ister" is simple. Beginning at the mouth of the Danube, the filmmakers David Barison and Daniel Ross journey upstream toward the river's source in Germany. En route they glean images with their digital video camera: riverbanks spiked with industrial equipment, bridges old and new, boatmen silhouetted at dusk, Roman ruins and hydroelectric dams, plants, tourists, a flock of geese. A stately travelogue, graced by an especially fine motif: placid views from the stern of a boat, white wake rippling the immemorial river.

We never see the makers of this "videofilm," as they call it, but we pass a great deal of time in the company of their interview subjects, men of singular mind and singularly esoteric speech. We'll get to them in a minute. Here is where discussion of "The Ister" — the word is the ancient Greek name for the Danube and the title of a poem by Hölderlin — gets complicated.

Let's dive in. "The Ister" flows from a lecture course delivered by Heidegger in 1942. The subject was Hölderlin's hymn of the river, and the philosophic talk ranged over many fields of inquiry, from poetry to politics, Sophocles to technology. Mr. Barison and Mr. Ross quote extensively from the lecture, using screen titles, dense verbal chunks no sooner processed (perhaps) by the brain than the camera moves on to the unfathomable analysis of the film's interviewees.

For one full hour — which may feel like five, depending on your capacity for French theory — the philosopher Bernard Stiegler ruminates on man's relationship to "technics" and time, discoursing on Prometheus, prosthetics and technology as a trace of human memory. Jean-Luc Nancy, an inscrutable former colleague of Jacques Derrida, next delivers cryptic abstractions on the foundation of polis and politics. He is followed by another professional penseur, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who grapples with Heidegger's infamous embrace of Nazism. The final passage is devoted to the cult German cinéaste Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, who declares an end to the "poetic power" of rivers.

Approach "The Ister" prepared for subtitled discussion of "negentropy" — and a transporting intellectual experience. Or not. Those who balk at the idea of devoting three hours of their lives and 3,000 times their average synaptic output to an avant-garde video essay about Heidegger have good reason. "The Ister" asks you not to think, but to think hard. Your reward, given in proportion to your level of attention, commitment and participation, is to see the simplest things in a new light, possessed of vast new dimensions.

the village VOICE

Mystic River: Heideggerian Cine-Essay Treks Up the Danube

The Ister

by J. Hoberman

February 7th, 2006 10:58 AM

Twilight of the god: The Ister
photo: Anthology Film Archives

The Ister
Written and directed by David Barison and Daniel Ross
First Run/Icarus, February 10 through 16, Anthology
be social

The headiest, head-scratching-est, damnedest, most demanding movie opening this week in New York, *The Ister* could be simply described as a philosophical travelogue. Or rather a German philosophical travelogue: A countryman of the two filmmakers, David Barison and Daniel Ross, approvingly called the movie "positively un-Australian."

Named for and made to mark the 300th anniversary of Friedrich H Danubian hymn, this three-hour cine-essay travels upriver from the Danube's mouth to its source, even as it ponders Martin Heidegger's 1942 lecture-course on H poem. Going upriver, the documentarians—one of whom wrote his doctoral thesis on Heidegger—seem to reverse the flow of history. The viewer is drenched with the spray of Wagner's Twilight of the Gods (plus pieces by Bruckner and Schubert), as the DV doc sweeps past the archaeological excavation of an ancient Greek city and notes a contemporary presidential visitation (Romania); passes a succession of recently bombed cities (Serbia) and bridges (Croatia), a Stalin-era model town (Hungary), and a Nazi concentration camp (Mauthausen); and visits two mock classical temples (Bavaria) to wind up in the heart of darkness, the Black Forest cabin where Heidegger wrote *Being and Time.*

There is evidently a German term for just such an aquatic road movie— wasserstrasse—but The Ister also offers a stream of consciousness. The filmmakers have little to say. There are, however, several voluble intellectuals. Bank robber turned philosopher Bernard Stiegler (the subject of Ross and Barison's next movie), several Derrideans, and filmmaker Hans-J Syberberg are on hand to gloss or contest Heidegger's sense of Greek myths, embrace of German nationalism, and notion of technics. The latter is often visualized as islands of debris clogging the river. So too the philosopher: As quoted, Heidegger is largely impenetrable ("modern machine technology is 'spirit' ?") and sometimes outrageous, suggesting that the ancient Greeks are "pure National Socialists" or comparing the "motorized food industry" of the 1948 Berlin Airlift to production of corpses at Auschwitz. It's enough to justify Samuel Beckett's laconic observation that each word is "an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness."

Ross and Barison interpolate several passages from Syberberg's phantasmagorical magnum opus Hitler, a Film From Germany and obviously admire its fearless exhumation of German romanticism. Syberberg, however, clearly thinks they have embarked on an impossible project: "Rivers don't have that poetic power anymore." The Ister offers a more modest way of imagining Europe—contemplating its geography as it has shaped and been shaped. Is the humble DV mini-cam the technology that frames the river's essence? Largely unmediated, the onrushing landscape, however despoiled, provides a lucid Bazinian counterpoint to the babbling brook of Heideggerian *seinundzeitis*. History is made present, although time and place are in constant flux.

bbc.co.uk

The Ister (2004)

REVIEWER RATING ★★★★☆

USER RATING ★★★★☆

Reviewed by Jamie Russell
Updated 22 September 2004

A philosophical investigation in to the nature of being and time, covering everything from palaeontology to the Internet to genocide, The Ister is the challenging debut film from Australian philosophy students David Barison and Daniel Ross. Taking the 1942 lectures of German thinker Martin Heidegger and the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin as their starting point, the pair travel along the Danube river ("The Ister") as a series of contemporary European philosophers discuss their relationship to Heidegger's work.

Erudite and initially rather imposing, The Ister presupposes some knowledge of Heidegger, as philosophers Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg chat independently about one of his most influential themes: the impact of technology on memory, culture and historical identity. Armed with a PhD and a digital movie camera, Barison and Ross trace Heidegger's ill-fated links to Nazism (the philosopher served as rector of Freiburg University from 1933-1934 and delivered his lectures on Hölderlin in 1942 as the Nazis were drawing up plans for the Final Solution) as they evaluate his pivotal role in modern thought.

"AN IMPRESSIVE PHILOSOPHICAL EXERCISE"

The film's masterstroke is the Danube river trip undertaken by the filmmakers, as the winding route allows them to expand the film beyond the merely academic, taking in the impact of NATO bombing raids on Yugoslavia, former Nazi concentration camps, and lessons in ancient history stretching back to Greek and Roman times. Journeying across the continent, the antipodean filmmakers create a series of bridges between past and present as they outline Heidegger's understanding of the way in which being and identity emerge from historical circumstances.

As a metaphor for the ebb and flow of time, the river's a brilliant choice, recalling the stately desolation of Harvey Keitel's Balkan trip in Theo Angelopoulos's Ulysses Gaze as it collapses European geography and history into a continuous here and now. An impressive philosophical exercise and a meditative work of cinematic beauty.

In French and English with subtitles.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2004/09/17/the_ister_2004_review.shtml

Adrian Martin review
Brisbane International Film Festival 2004

From the Brisbane International Film Festival

This remarkable three-hour video-essay appears to have come from nowhere—at least in terms of the Australian film scene—and instantly won its rightful place on the international film festival circuit. David Barison and Daniel Ross, dropped in, around Europe, on some of the major thinkers and artists of our time: the philosophers Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and the celebrated German filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. The result is the most intellectually rigorous and searching film ever made in this country.

At the basis of this project are two texts: a 'hymn' by the poet Friedrich Hölderlin called 'The Ister', which is a mystical meditation on the Danube, and the commentary on this poem delivered in lecture form by the philosopher Martin Heidegger in early 1942. At stake are many histories: the history of human beings and their relation to nature; the birth of a technological society and its consequences; the succession of 'tribal' wars that have divided and re-divided the land, filling it with monuments and ruins; the history of philosophy itself, as it struggles to conceptualise the ideas of existence, lineage, and progress that underpin European civilisation's image of itself—often at the cost of brutal, bloody exclusions. And through it all, the river flows, gathering up and emptying out places, times, ghosts of every sort …

Simply but beautifully photographed, the film is also an essay on montage itself: images of land, architecture, animals, water, communal celebrations, and so on do not simply illustrate the spoken ideas but return again and again in different contexts. Pitching itself somewhere new and unique between Chris Marker and Terrence Malick, The Ister is a 'positively un-Australian' classic.

Time Out

***Time Out,* London**
October 6 2004

The Ister(nc) (David Barison & Daniel Ross, 2004, AU) Documentary. 190 mins.

An ambitious philosophical video essay , 'The Ister' takes its cue from Martin Heidegger's 1942 lectures on the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Specifically, it's the latter's poem 'The Ister', musing on the river Danube, that exercises the controversial German thinker and provides the conceptual and visual framework for Barison and Ross' own meditation on his challenging philosophy. Journeying from the river's mouth to Germany, the film incorporates the reflections of key contemporary theorists on the changing nature of European civilisation and its conflicts, the role of technology and the character of philosophy itself. The result is a singular one, creating a layered and rigorous meditation on place and ethics that is strangely affirming.

FILM (Channel4.com, UK)

189 minutes
Australia (2004)

The Ister

starring
Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe , Jean-Luc Nancy , Bernard Stiegler , Hans-Jürgen Syderberg

directed by
David Barison , Daniel Ross

THE ISTER FILM REVIEW

Australian documentary filmmakers David Barison and Daniel Ross make an epic journey up the Danube, exploring the continued relevance of the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger

This enormously ambitious digital video essay was inspired by a course of lectures given by Heidegger in the summer of 1942 on the subject of a poem about the Danube titled 'The Ister', which was written in the early 19th century by Friedrich Holderlin. (The Ister was the Greco-Roman name given to a stretch of the Danube.)

Journeying up the river from its endpoint in Romania, through Hungary, Austria and the former Yugoslavia to its source in the Black Forest in Germany, Barison and Ross interview a trio of French philosophers - Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe - and the German filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, all of whom ponder Heidegger's philosophical ideas about technology, time, mortality, memory and history, and consider how they relate to today's Europe.

Structured into five chapters, and drawing heavily on Greek myth, **The Ister** doesn't shy away from Heidegger's National Socialist leanings: Lacoue-Labarthe grapples with his infamous equation of the Holocaust with modernized agriculture. Admittedly, those without prior philosophical training in Heidegger's thought are likely to find themselves at times overwhelmed by the complexity and volume of ideas discussed here. Yet Barison and Ross have nevertheless managed to fashion a film of considerable visual distinction that in its multi-layered montages recalls the brilliance of Chris Marker's **Sans Soleil**.

Travelling up the Danube they pause at sights and buildings with particular relevance to the film's intellectual concerns: a rebuilt bridge that had been destroyed by NATO jets in Serbia, a WWII concentration camp at Mauthausen, the Valhalla temple built to celebrate the connection between 19th century Germany and ancient Greece. But what makes The Ister so distinctive is its flow of images of the natural world, and the Danube in particular, which throw up endless associations and connections, giving the film a strangely hypnotic quality. Ebbing and flowing over its three hour running time, and heading off into unusual tributaries, The Ister serves as an impressive cinematic tribute to the river from which it takes its name.

Verdict
If its intellectual rigour can feel overbearing, The Ister still possesses a visual beauty that's rare in the documentary field.

http://www.channel4.com/film/reviews/film.jsp?id=136877

THE ISTER/*MP*

WORLD PREMIERE – MAIN PROGRAMME

Through a fascinating journey down the 2840 kilometre long Danube, modern Australians investigate Heidegger's interpretation of Hölderlin. In other words about Fundamental Issues such as Culture, Nature, Technology and Politics. With the film maker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. Panta rei.

In The Ister, a journey is made along the Danube -from the Black Sea Delta in Rumania upstream to the source in Germany's Black Forest -a journey based on the lectures given by the influential yet controversial philosopher Martin Heidegger around a poem by Hölderlin. The lectures date from 1942, the year when the Nazis decided to implement the Final Solution. Looking at the 2840-kilometre-long river, questions are posed about fundamental issues such as nature, technology and politics. The film demands a lot from the spectator, but it's worth it, because much insight is provided into the fascinating thoughts of Heidegger and into the foundations of Western civilisation. The film is made up of five parts. In part one, Bernard Stiegler discusses the story of humanity as the story of the history of technology. On the way we meet a Yugoslavian engineer who talks about the NATO bombing raids in Novi Sad in 1999. In part two, we travel through Hungary, while the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy reflects on the nature of political institutions and on the fundamental concepts of democracy in the face of tyranny. In part three, in Austria, the philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe investigates Heidegger's opinions about technology in relation to his Nazi sympathies. In part four, we again hear from Stiegler and two 19th-century German monuments are rediscovered. In part five, film maker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg prominently takes centre stage.

http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/en/film/27364.html

The Ister: search for the source

Hamish Ford
The Ister
Realtime edition no .64

The Ister is the ultimate philosophical road movie, a 3-hour journey the length of the Danube River accompanied by major contemporary philosophers discussing humanity, technology, politics and Martin Heidegger. It is an ambitious film in every sense. Yet this is the self-funded debut of Melbourne-based filmmakers David Barison and Daniel Ross—IT professional and Philosophy PhD respectively—who 5 years ago travelled to Europe, hired an old bread-van, bought a mini-DV camera and set about filming. In an interview with RealTime, Barison and Ross commented that they "obtained absolutely no funding whatsoever, largely due to our fear of bureaucracy and the film's lack of 'Australian content'." Although in my view the best local film of the year, The Ister is about as un-Australian as you can get in terms of the arcane criteria guiding our funding bodies.

The film concerns questions of home in the broadest and most challenging philosophical sense—questions that are of no less potential relevance in Australia than elsewhere. The filmmakers told me they wanted to position this theme as the film's ambiguous centre by beginning with an evocation of European 'home' in the form of Germany (the source of the Danube), and then start the journey with 'the foreign' in the form of Romania (where the Danube meets the Black Sea). How to judge such a distinction is left to the audience.

Flowing from Europe's 'centre' to its 'periphery', the Danube is a paradoxical icon of time, perpetual change and home. The film's multi-levelled, epic journey takes us from Romania, through a NATO-bombed former Yugoslavia, then Hungary—all currently undergoing radical transformations vis-a-vis what constitutes the nation state, national identity and political culture within an expanding Europe. The journey finally ends in Germany, a country riddled with markers of the Enlightenment and Fascism, and the heart of the EU's unfolding experiment in multilateral politics, economics and culture.

While such a journey makes for the grandest of poetic and philosophical tropes, it is also treated with some sly humour. At every stop up the river, on-screen text not only informs us where we are, but also the "distance to source." Reaching said source in the heart of Germany's Black Forest is not only anticlimactic (it's a modest porcelain pool); we then go beyond the river's starting point by following small tributaries, the film now designating the distance from source in negative digits. Yet this subtly absurd extension of the search for origins is also deadly serious, offering both a philosophical substantiation of our mythical investments in home and a concurrent note of auto-critique.

This river-road movie is given its explicitly philosophical textual content via extended meditations by a range of interviewees on a 1942 lecture series by influential German philosopher Martin Heidegger on Hölderlin's poem Der Ister (the Germanised variation of an old Greco-Roman name for the Danube). But prior to honing in on Heidegger, the film's first hour features an extensive interview with contemporary German-French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, providing a wide-ranging exegesis of Western thought from Ancient Greek mythology through the middle ages and the Industrial Revolution to late (post)modernity. Combined with beautifully contrived images of mythological and contemporary Europe, Stiegler's entertaining storytelling provides important big-picture historical and conceptual background, and a devoted yet also circuitous and ambivalent framing of Heidegger's view of technology.

The guiding theme developed by Stiegler is the question of 'technis', which he addresses ontologically as technology's inextricable, prosthetic relationship to the human. While memory is literally unthinkable without technology for a 21st century audience, Stiegler argues that this has been the case since the origins of human culture. In fact he defines human culture as the ability to transmit information across space and time, a crucial distinction between the experience of human beings and other animals. The filmmakers enact this notion in quite playful ways via repeated images of animals and environments that remind us of earlier scenes. Like the aphorism about not being able to put one's foot in the same river twice, these recurring images are inevitably 'different' the second time around, and prompt 'faulty' recollection or even forgetting just as frequently as the subject's intermittent ability to affirm recognition in the face of time. According to Ross, this is one of the things the filmmakers most wanted to show. "The impossibility of holding everything together in one's head, and of putting all the pieces together intelligibly in one sitting," he suggests, "is thus itself something the audience is forced to acknowledge, and hopefully to draw conclusions from."

After asking 'what is' the human being, its politics and culture in light of what Stiegler argues is technology's ontologically inextricable role, Heidegger enters centre stage. Although the filmmakers are clearly devotees of his philosophy, the viewer is strongly encouraged to enact their own perspective. This is brought to a head when the film broaches the topic of Heidegger's association with National Socialism (the philosopher enthusiastically embraced Nazism in 1933, disassociating himself a year later). In light of the Holocaust, the film explicitly addresses the question of the vexed relationship between Heidegger's notorious political choices and his arguments and views regarding technology. This discussion is based in part around Heidegger's controversial suggestion of an equivalence between the Nazi gas chambers and automated agriculture.

Barison and Ross say they sought to deal with the question of this important but contested link by maintaining its 'enigmatic' nature. While The Ister enters into a nuanced critique of the political outcomes of Heidegger's personal and philosophical choices, it also reveals the limits to which the filmmakers want to push such a debate. In our interview they suggested that the questions Heidegger pursues are "not reducible to a rhetorical trick by which he escapes political judgment", and posited an argument Heidegger's more scathing critics strongly contest: that one can, or even should, be able to differentiate his thinking from his politics.

Rather than a necessarily flawless assertion of Heidegger's continuing relevance, The Ister offers a dense yet well orchestrated philosophical portrait of a controversial figure that encapsulates what is most impressive and 'substantial' about European (particularly German) thought, as well as its flawed and disturbing elements. The film's potentially problematic aspects actually add to its multi-layered pleasures by strongly encouraging the viewer to engage actively and dialectically, rhapsodically and/or critically, at any given moment. No other film so extensively extols the genuine pleasures of philosophical thinking.

In making the film, Barison and Ross wanted to approach philosophy as both an academic discipline and an embodied event. While the viewer is guided to some degree by the on-screen 'professionals', philosophy is presented as a kind of thinking that "belongs to everyone, and is a part of the character of human being." The Ister is an impressive testament to the filmmakers' belief that the fusion of philosophy and art, as exemplified by Heidegger's meditation on Hölderlin's poem, can reap extraordinarily rich results.

"Our main intention and hope", the filmmakers told me, "was to find a method for communicating cinematically both the rigour of philosophy and the awe about the world that inspires philosophy." Central to this experience for the viewer is an immense textural pleasure derived from leisurely, meditative rhythms generated by very careful editing, allowing generous screen duration for images of astounding technical quality and deceptively simple composition. Ross rightly says, "The Ister is actually put together in a largely non-symbolic way," even being "hopefully very concrete." This formal rigour and concreteness gives the viewer the necessary time-space material with which to engage the challenging ideas at hand.

"In essence", Barison and Ross assert, "we wanted to say to philosophy: 'look at this incredible tool for framing concepts, for telling abstract stories'...look how much is gained with the use of sound

and image." The filmmakers have fused cinema and philosophy in a process that beautifully exemplifies Stiegler's account of technology's prosthetic relationship to the human. The Ister amply demonstrates and embodies the incredibly rich results that can be generated from such an ontologically confusing yet entirely 'natural' event.

The Ister, writers/directors David Barison, Daniel Ross, 2004.

The Ister debuted at International Film Festival Rotterdam in January 2004 and has since played at numerous local and internation festivals. The film will soon be available on DVD from www.theister.com

The Jewish Week
SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

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Films Without A View

Series shows movies that have a hard time getting U.S. distributors.

George Robinson - Special To The Jewish Week

There are many reasons a film doesn't get distributed in the United States. The mere fact that it isn't in English and has subtitles already puts it at a disadvantage. An unconventional approach to narrative, an unusually long running time, being a documentary — these all are frequently counted as demerits when distributors are looking for a film that will fill seats. It would not be hard to assemble a long list of important films that have had little or no theatrical exposure here.

Indeed, the editors of Film Comment do something like that every year at the Walter Reade Theater, and their annual Film Comment Selects series is usually a good showcase of movies that either never or only barely make it onto a larger American stage.

"The Ister," directed by David Barison and Daniel Ross, is an excellent example of a film that would probably slip through the cracks without such a forum. It is mostly in French, three hours long and about philosophy. The filmmakers, Australian grad students in philosophy, set out on a journey up the Danube from the Romanian delta, past NATO-bombed bridges, the Mauthausen death camp, and end up at the river's source in Germany, nearly 2,900 kilometers through the hellish heart of the 20th century.

What they have in mind, then, is not a travelogue. Rather, they use the river as the string holding together an incredibly intricate and complex structure, with Martin Heidegger's lecture on Friedrich Holderlin's poem "The Ister" (the ancient Roman name for the river) as the jumping-off point for a series of dialogues with French philosophers Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philip Lacoue-Labarthe and German filmmaker Hans-Jurgen Syberberg. The result is nothing less than a dissection of the nightmarish role of technology in human culture — culminating in the Shoah — and Heidegger's eager acceptance of the Nazis rise to power.

As unpromising as the premise may sound, "The Ister" is seldom less than fascinating, not only because the filmmakers chose their interview subjects wisely and the footage of the great river is quite handsome. More important, the film is cunningly structured in both small and large segments. There is frequent dry humor in the juxtaposition of image and soundtrack, as in the counterpart of Stiegler's discussion of the innate characteristics of the gazelle with a shot of an enormous garden snail. But the larger structure of the film is an intricate interweaving of shots from the whole of the journey, repeated in a variety of contexts, their significance being altered by their placement within the flow of images.

The structural sophistication of the filmmakers is nowhere more apparent than in the introduction of the subject of the Holocaust and Heidegger's obstinate refusal to face the reality of Nazism even after the war. In the first half of the film, Stiegler speaks at length about his concept of "technics," or technology, as the extension of man's self and the creation of the ability of a culture to remember its past. Then Nancy talks about the historical development of democracy and the Greek idea of the polis. Like a skilled angler, Barison and Ross have baited their hook, and it strikes home at the end of the segment when a title reminds us that Heidegger's lecture on "The Ister" was given in 1942 and that the polis he was addressing were Nazis.

Immediately following the intermission, the second half of the film opens with a clip from Syberberg's "Hitler: A Film From Germany," in which we hear Himmler's infamous 1942 speech telling the SS what their new task would be: the murder of Europe's Jewish population. The formal ingenuity and audacity with which Barison and Ross achieve this coup de cinema is breathtaking, and the discussion that follows, in which Lacoue-Labarthe considers and dismisses defenses of Heidegger's later, callous mention of the Holocaust in connection with the Berlin Airlift, would almost be superfluous were it not so superbly argued.

I suspect that distribution for "The Ister" is still a long shot, and that is a shame, because while the film is much too densely worked-out visually and too loaded with complicated ideas to be absorbed in a single viewing, it is rewarding enough that I can't wait to see it again.

I am not in the habit of giving up in the middle of films and it bothers me greatly to write about a film that I didn't see in its entirety. However, "Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel," by Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan, wore me out very quickly. Khleifi and Sivan took a video camera with them as they rode the highways of Israel and Palestine in 2002, following the border proposed by the 1947 Partition Plan, interviewing the ordinary people they found along the way. After one hour of this 270-minute film, I grew tired of being treated to a parade of bigots and ignoramuses of a wide range of political persuasions. At least in its first hour, "Route 181" is like a severe dose of talk radio. The failure or unwillingness of the filmmakers to give a larger historical or cultural context to the rantings they recorded is ethically irresponsible and aesthetically lethal. This is one film whose lack of a distributor does not constitute a great loss. n

"Film Comment Selects" is running at the Walter Reade Theater, 70 Lincoln Center Plaza, through Feb. 24. For information, call (212) 875-5600 or go to www.filmlinc.com.

THE AGE
theage.com.au

Flow of rich philosophy

July 29, 2004

Two Australians track the Danube in search of deeper meaning, writes Philippa Hawker.

Three French philosophers, a German filmmaker and a duck. A river, a lecture series, a poem. History, memory, technology, politics. A Roman column, a bridge, a concentration camp. *The Ister*, a new Australian documentary, is a film of images, objects and ideas; a rich, dense and exhilarating series of connections, arguments and ambiguities that takes the form of a journey up the River Danube, from the Black Sea to its source.

It is based on a 1942 series of lectures by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, which drew on a Holderlin poem called *The Ister*, an older, Greek-derived name for the Danube.

The film is full of historical associations and references, but it is a work in the present tense, a documentary with a sense of immediacy and inquiry, a film about past and present that makes use of cinema's power of associations, its ability to show the tangible, material aspect of things.

For its two Melbourne filmmakers, David Barison and Daniel Ross, the project had its origins nine years ago, with a shared interest in Heidegger and cinema.

"We came to filmmaking as cinephiles, being able to talk about films and philosophy ad nauseam, and wanting to put that to some practical end," Barison says. "Our goal was to find some audio-visual form that philosophy might have."

Ross (pictured right) went on to write a PhD thesis; Barison (pictured left) worked in a range of areas, including the *Age's* online section.

The Ister had its premiere at Rotterdam in January and has been invited to several international festivals. They plan to make another film together, and they're working on other ideas, including a book by Ross about contemporary politics that they'd like to turn into a TV series.

After deciding on the lecture series as their subject matter, and studying it at length, they made a couple of trips to Europe, following the course of the river, visiting their interview subjects, and - when they found they had under-estimated the cost of petrol - taking a detour to Italy to borrow money from Barison's uncle.

The philosophers can be heard at length, but this isn't a film of talking heads and dry statements.

They had researched and analysed their material at length, and knew there were places and objects they wanted to film: but other elements of the documentary weren't pre-arranged.

Once Stiegler agreed, their other subjects followed: philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and filmmaker Hans-Jurgen Syberberg, all of whom had, in different ways, something to say about

Heidegger, his philosophy and its contemporary impact.

Ross and Barison returned to Australia with 12 hours of interviews in French, three in English, and about 50 hours of footage from the river.

The philosophers can be heard at length, but this isn't a film of talking heads and dry statements.

The Ister is slightly more than three hours long, and is screened with an intermission.

Towards the end of the first part, a question about Heidegger is raised about the relationship between his life and his thought: his membership of the Nazi party, and a notorious comparison he made in 1949 between death camps and modern agriculture.

He is still, Ross and Barison say, an uncomfortable figure for German audiences: French rather than German philosophers have taken up his work.

And the pair were struck by the fact that at the screening of their movie in Munich, the audience avoided asking any questions about Heidegger or World War II.

The Ister screens at ACMI on Monday at 8.30pm, with an introduction by the filmmakers. They will also take part in a free forum at the Festival Club on Tuesday at 8pm. Another screening is at the VCA on August 16. For more information on the film, see www.theister.com

This story was found at: ***http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/07/28/1090694015046.html***

Sight&Sound

FROM DECEMBER 2004 EDITION

In 1942 the German philosopher Martin Heidegger delivered a lecture series which discussed Friedrich Hölderlin's poem 'The Ister' (c.1803). The 'Ister' is from 'Istros', the Greek name given to the lower River Danube, passing through today's Romania and Bulgaria. The film The Ister conceives of itself as an "accompaniment" to this lecture course and to Hölderlin's "hymn", as he called it.

The film-makers capture images of the Danube travelling upstream along the 2,840 km from its mouth in Sulina, Romania to its disputed source(s) in the Black Forest in Germany. In the prologue, French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, whose work engages with Heidegger's ideas about technology, locates the birth of technology in the myth of Prometheus, who gave fire to man when his brother Epimetheus had given all the natural survival qualities to animals. The first section of the journey from the mouth of the Danube to Vukovar in Croatia is accompanied by an interview with Stiegler about technology and time. This introduces the subject of Heidegger's politics - he was a card-carrying Nazi in the 19305-which is taken up in the second section by another French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, as the film crosses the Republic of Hungary.

In the third section, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe tackles Heidegger's post-war remarks about technology, the Holocaust and food production as the film moves from Vienna to the concentration camp at Mauthausen. In section four, Stiegler ruminates on mortality and memory as the film enters Germany and lingers at the Hall of Memory in Kelheim. In the final section, the film-makers talk to film director Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, who tells them modern Germany has no place for Heidegger and Hölderlin. In an epilogue, images of the Danube are overlaid with a recording of Martin Heidegger reading Hölderlin's poem.

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The Ister emerged from a doctoral thesis that Daniel Ross, one of its two Australian debut directors, had written on Martin Heidegger, and its intellectual and cinematic ambitions are exhilaratingly hubristic. Ross and co-director David Barison aimed to contribute to a wider understanding of philosophy while crafting a film that was itself a serious philosophical enquiry and cinematic to boot. The stimulating but occasionally overwhelmingly dense result - a three-hour intellectual travelogue of the River Danube that took five years to digitally assemble - is less an essay film along the lines of two of the film-makers' models, Chris Marker and Patrick Keiller, than a contribution to a novel documentary sub-genre: the DVPhD.

The Ister tackles the translation of complex ideas rooted in language into cinema in three ways: by seeking out mentor-guides who set out their intellectual stall for us on Heideggerian questions of antiquity, memory, technology, place and European identity; by selecting and often associatively reiterating images from their journey up the Danube; and finally by means of a hefty volume of on-screen captioning comprising long excerpts from Heidegger's lectures, Hölderlin's poem The Ister', stretches of historiography and Ross and Barison's own subtitles from the French.

The film's on-screen logorrhoea probably comes into its own viewed on a laptop. On the large screen, the visual pleasure comes from the carefully chosen images - of nature, of crowds waving at television images of George W. Bush arriving in Bucharest in 2002, of bridges -and from the enjoyment of experiencing fashionably emaciated French philosophers wearing black in book-lined studies as they deploy large ideas, often coherently. Key in this respect is the convivial Bernard

Stiegler, whose USP is having learned his craft while serving a prison sentence for armed robbery and whose agreement to participate convinced the film-makers that the project had legs. (Their next film will be a profile of Stiegler.) Stiegler expatiates on his differences with Heidegger's thoughts on technology and historical consciousness and has us convinced, until he adduces his pet dog Orphee with the words "The doggy is human, you know because I have named it." Warming to his theme, Stiegler adds that his own German name, even though he is French, means that he is "responsible for the Shoah, for Auschwitz".

Preposterous and posturing though this contention is, it leads the film on to Heidegger's espousal of Nazism as surely as the Danube leads us through the war zones of ex-Yugoslavia (cleverly introduced through a consideration of the history of bridges on this stretch) and to the concentration camp at Mauthausen in Austria. This is an obligatory stop, made also by renowned Italian Germanist Claudio Magris, whose erudite work The Danube travelled downstream not upstream and included disturbing passages about Mauthausen, which was built next to a stone quarry, prisoners having been forced to carry stone up a "stairway of death" now preserved as a memorial. At this point, Derrida associate Philippe LacoueLabarthe considers Heidegger's notorious r 949 pronouncement that "the motorised food industry is in essence the same as the production of corpses in gas chambers" in terms of a caesura a Heideggerian term for something irreversible - in human history when mankind finds itself short of breath. The camera pans around the interiors at Mauthausen and, in a lapse of taste which is itself breathtaking, settles on a close-up of Labarthe's overflowing ashtray as he speaks of "European humanity's historical emphysema". It is a hefty challenge for The Isterto reconcile its contrary inclinations towards show-off didacticism Heidegger and Hölderlin probably not being the best tourist guides - and openminded discovery, its need to be both Promethean and Epimethean.

Only when the philosophers are left behind and we are given a large stark caption "Germany", do we sense danger to the plan in the form of film-maker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, our final guide. Syberberg's masterly five-hour theatrical Hitler, a Film from Germany, quoted in The Ister, is from a different planet to current forms of DV reality film-making (which he nicely typifies as "watching what goes on in the watercloset"). In stumbling broken English and vaguely bemused, uncharacteristically minimalist style, Syberberg goes straight to the nub of the project's conceptual problem. "Rivers don't have that poetic power any more," he says and for the first time we hear one of the film-makers' voices as he coaxes more out of him: "It's no good taking the poems to Greece because it was a projection, not the real Greece." At this point a mighty project - both based in and expedited by the apparent perversity of two intellectually gifted young Australian film-maker-scholars setting out to provide concrete images of Europe to sit alongside the weighty classicism of Heidegger and Hölderlin - appears to wobble.

After this the ambition seems diluted when we get to the two disputed sources of the Danube a caption, in sudden guidebook style, recommends "a position of strict neutrality" to those "intending to enjoy the hospitality of Donaueschingen and Furtwangen". The film then takes Syberberg at his word when he expresses his preference for Heidegger reading Hölderlin rather than an actor - and the epilogue comprises just that. But the film leaves us with an image of nature: a duck with no name, whose image has reappeared throughout the film. This lucky duck, as untroubled by knowledge of its own mortality as it is by whether technology has an ontology, waddles off into the distance on a paved promenade alongside the Danube at Regensburg. The Chaplin walk-off meets ex-Heidegger scholar Terrence Malick - you probably can't get much more cinematic than that.

Richard Falcon

The Ister

Dir. David Barison/Daniel Ross, 2004 , Australia , 189 mins, subtitles

Cast: Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Hans-Jurgen Syberberg

The Ister is a thought-provoking series of philosophical discussions inspired by Martin Heidegger's wartime lectures on Friedrich Holderlin's poetry (themes include man's relationship to the machine and ancient Greece's influence on western civilization). This is realised as a journey along the river Danube from the Black Sea Delta in Romania, upstream through Bulgaria to it's source in Germany's Black Forest. We are taken through the rubble of the former Yugoslavia, through a Hungary trying to restore her sense of national identity (vying with the forces of American globalization), and through a Germany that is both the ghost of an extinct Europe and the heart of an uncertain new one.

The film tries to bridge that awkward gap between ideology and art. It presents the idea that man as technical being is an essential, even spiritual, concern through argument and visual motif. The repeated image of the Danube's source at the bottom of the screen and huge telephone poles stretching off into the pine forested distance at the top of the screen, replaces the old fashioned metaphor of life's progress as a river with the image of technological advancement as the new 'way'.

Heidegger considered the essential philosophical (and human) question to be: What kind of "being" is man and how is he related to the objects he lives with? The film chooses to look at this question from the perspective of technics. How the industrial revolution in the past and the subsequent technological revolution defines humanity; the way man lives, fights, and views himself.

As the speakers reflect on things like the nature of political institutions in the face of tyranny and their foundations in Greek democracy, the occasional mythical text scrolls down the page to provide the aesthetic adhesive needed to hold together the experience.

There is an interesting discussion of Heidegger's view of technology in relation to his own Nazi sympathies. Most memorably, Heidegger's belief that industrialized agriculture was part of the same system responsible for the gas chambers (as a way of distancing man from his actions). The way technological 'progress' changed the face of war, making possible large scale deportations, the abstracted dropping of bombs, turning murder into a mere technicality. The viewer is encouraged to question the benefits of a technological civilization where technics develops so much faster than culture.

For people interested in questioning the philosophical background to the turbulent events of 20th century, The Ister is a grim, yet seamlessly filmed accompaniment.

Deborah Nichols

www.sensesofcinema.com

Killing the Gatekeeper: Autonomy, Globality and Reclaiming Australian Cinema

by Matthew Clayfield

Matthew Clayfield is a film and television student at Bond University in Queensland, Australia. He maintains a personal weblog in which he writes extensively about film and his own filmmaking.

If there's one thing to be said about Australian cinema at present, it's that those of us who actually care about it – a number that's rapidly dwindling, let me tell you – are currently caught in a state of what can only be described as perpetual disillusionment. It's true. Year in and year out, those of us with a vested or merely casual interest in the resurrection of Australian cinema will dutifully buy into the hype surrounding one or two government-funded "quality" or "prestige" projects that will be praised almost unanimously before fading away into the hazy nothingness from whence they came. After last year's AFI-winning *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003) failed to single-handedly kick-start the industry (at least in terms of box office receipts) the initial excitement that had surrounded it spontaneously combusted – along with the picture itself, it seems, which has all but disappeared from memory.

Each year has its own *Japanese Story* or two; films that are expected to forgive us our sins and deliver us from some sort of commercial and aesthetic evil, but which ultimately fail to do anything of the sort. It's not that these pictures are particularly "bad" in the usual sense of the word. But none of them are particularly "good" either. Certainly, none of them are "great", and none of them – "wunderkind" director Cate Shortland's *Somersault* (2004), for example – are going to take Australian cinema to the place it needs to be: a place that, in my opinion, cannot be reached until our outdated notions of a "national" cinema (notions that are so blindingly, detrimentally obvious in almost every one of these government-funded "quality" pictures) have been completely revised, or done away with.

The Irrelevancy of a National Identity

The 1970s in Australia were a time of social, political and artistic upheaval. The Australian public was actively and passionately searching for a cultural identity that it could call its own. With the intervention of the Gorton and Whitlam governments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Australian national cinema became a place for this cultural identity to be discovered and cultivated; both notable and commercially successful as a result of its "cultural mission".

This was a cinema that offered its audience a workable national identity, an image of themselves that, arguably, a large part of the domestic audience accepted as being a fairly accurate – or at least appealing – representation. That this representation was either grotesque and vulgar (as in "Ocker" pictures such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* [Bruce Beresford, 1972], *Alvin Purple* [Tim Burstall, 1973] and *Don's Party* [Bruce Beresford, 1976]) or increasingly (if unintentionally) self-important (as in "Renaissance" or "Quality" pictures such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* [Peter Weir, 1975] and *My Brilliant Career* [Gillian Armstrong, 1979]) is beside the point. Both the government funding bodies and the filmmakers themselves were offering the audience a representation that the vast majority approved of and – in the case of the "Renaissance" pictures in particular – could strive towards. These were not merely representations, but prototypes. And in the end, that's all that mattered.

For a while, anyway. In 1975, with the arrival of colour television in Australia, cinema attendances dropped by approximately 30% (1). The national identity offered by the cinematic "Renaissance" wasn't what Australia was after anymore. Writes Tom O'Regan, "what Australian culture needed was contemporary representations, not nostalgia films. Australians needed to be resituated within their own culture and history with new and more relevant symbols than that of the Australian legend, mateship [and] the Aussie battler." (2) The question of national identity – who or what an "Australian" was (an unanswerable question, but there it is) – was once again up for grabs. But who was there to answer it?

While the prototypes offered up for Australians to aspire to in the late 1970s and early 1980s were increasingly irrelevant to domestic audiences, there were precious few filmmakers and films left in the revival's wake to pick up the slack. But maybe it was the audience's *need* for an all-encompassing and singular

national identity for Australia that had disappeared, and thus maybe the filmmakers had begun to flog a dead horse.

If so, then this certainly remains the case today. Australian feature films are so preoccupied with what they believe – incorrectly, in my opinion – to be the obligation of Australian cinema that they ultimately fail to speak to anyone at all – certainly not the Australian audiences, who don't want to be spoken *at*, but *with*; something that films such as *Somersault* and *Tom White* (Alkinos Tsilimidos, 2004), as hard as they try to break the pattern, cannot help but do. They say "this is Australia and these are Australians", when really it's not and they're anything but. When all is said and done, and when the aforementioned hype has faded away, they're really just hybrid successors to the prototype-offering pictures of the 1970s – broad cultural caricatures that may look and sound Australian but have nothing important to say about this or any other country at all.

How could the vast majority of Australian filmmakers, many of them genuinely talented, assume that the *raison d'être* of Australian cinema has remained unchanged for the last three decades? I would argue that is perhaps *not* the filmmakers themselves (although their willingness to bend over and take it is reason enough in my mind for disdain), but the funding bodies whose concept of Australian cinema and its role has remained stagnant, lifeless and restrictive. And in a country of increasing conservative and borderline fanatical politically correct repression, this is most certainly not a good thing.

(In the interest of avoiding confusion, I should point out that I'm talking about political correctness as being the "avoidance of expressions or actions that can be perceived to exclude or marginalise or insult people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against" (3). I'm also not talking about it in a general sense, but in an overly zealous one that tiptoes along the line "discrimination in favour of".)

Shooting Through Conservative Lenses

Would it be wrong of me to suggest that the "national identity" of the current Australian cinema is almost entirely a by-product of an overly conservative government and its funding bodies? As Peter Sainsbury argued in his address to the 2002 Australian Screen Directors Association, "films emerging from a given funding system largely reflect the values and processes at the heart of their funding organisations, whatever they may be" (4), a notion that – in Australia, at least – is really a kind of death knell. If the national identity suggested by *Alvin Purple* in the 1970s was a politically incorrect one, then (in comparison) that which is offered by *Somersault* today is not only irrelevant to modern Australians, but nauseating in its politically correct content as well.

Somersault, despite a couple of strong points, is painfully methodical in its depiction of the "real" Australia, dutifully (and oh-so-tastefully) hitting every base – and every "issue" – that it can on its way to fulfilling its "cultural mission". Being careful not to marginalise anyone or anything, *Somersault* somehow manages to cover disability, drug and alcohol abuse, broken families and homosexuality (a staple "issue" that finds itself being "explored", however shallowly, in a number of other recent Australian films, including *Tom White* and *Lantana* [Ray Lawrence, 2001]). Particularly offensive is the absolutely irrelevant and unnecessary autistic brother in *Somersault*, whose condition is quite disrespectfully confined to the margins of blatant and overly-saccharine symbolism. Not one of these "issues" is treated with any dignity whatsoever: rather, they're simply approached as checkpoints that need to be hit by filmmakers in order to obtain financing from our conservative government funding bodies. "Your film doesn't have a token homosexual character in it? No autistic hobos? Nothing about Reconciliation? Well, then, *no soup for you*!" It's a sad state of affairs.

Of course, the filmmakers themselves – the projects of whom are presumably conceived *without* this slew of relevant discussion topics in mind – can be forgiven (to some extent) for brushing over the obligatory PC-material imposed upon them by the funding bodies with little more than a passing interest. But films operate as a whole, if I'm not mistaken, and even the elements that don't particularly interest the filmmaker are still a part of the movie. We can't just say, "Well, you know, you've got to make allowances for *Somersault*'s autistic brother, as pointless and therefore offensive as his presence may ultimately be. He's agitprop." Wait a minute. We have to make allowances? Well, excuse me, but I don't think so! The moment that one begins to make allowances for such things is the moment that one begins to settle for second best in a way that, in this country (in every field other than sporting achievement), is already rampant enough. Submission is the first step on the path to apathy, and apathy is a very dangerous and insidious thing indeed.

It is for this reason that the filmmakers themselves can only be forgiven to a certain extent – for while the politically correct content is not (always) of their own devising, it's still there, *in the films*. They have submitted, relented and given in to a kind of aesthetic oppression, and for taking that first step down the road of pure, unbridled apathy, they must be held responsible. Dependence on government funding bodies, it seems – or at least, on those in this country – is little more than a barrier to artistic and creative freedom. The time has come to break away from the constraints of the Australian industry, not only in terms of achieving greater autonomy

in the fields of financing and development, but also of ridding our pictures of their grotesque and deceptive portrayal of the "real" Australia.

The Global, the Specific and the Cultural Caricature

Of all the films that I've seen this year, two in particular have stood out as being signposts for the Australian industry at present: Jafar Panahi's *Crimson Gold* (2003) from Iran, and Kim Ki-duk's *Samaria* (*Samaritan Girl*) (2004) from South Korea. Where films like *Tom White* and *Somersault* are still tangled up with the irrelevant cultural mission of 1970s Australian cinema, trying to provide us with a government-approved national identity that we no longer need, *Crimson Gold* and *Samaria* (along with a slew of other films that include, off the top of my head, *Before Sunset* [Richard Linklater, 2004]; *A Good Lawyer's Wife* [Im Sang-soo, 2003]; *Head-On* [Fatih Akin, 2003]; *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [Michel Gondry, 2004] and, perhaps to a lesser extent, *The Saddest Music in the World* [Guy Maddin, 2003]) move beyond the representation of broad and simplistic cultural caricatures (see Bill Hunter in, well, just about anything) and into the realm of something far deeper and far greater – a "global" cinema that is at once both culturally specific and thematically universal, and which doesn't yield in utter complicity to the idea of its being part of a national cinema. Of course, in Panahi's case, his films can't be seen in Iran anyway.

Cinema need not be "Iranian", "Korean", "American" or "Australian" it need only be cinema, pure and simple. In contrast to *Crimson Gold* and *Samaria*, which are very much products of their respective countries, but which transcend the limitations of the concept of national cinema, contemporary Australian features are concerned with little more than being just that: "Australian", and labelled so accordingly. These films are not concerned with people – not even with Australian people – but with outdated and incorrect concepts of what Australian people are, were, should or could be. This is not to say that Australian filmmakers should just start ignoring Australia, of course. Jafar Panahi's concerns are quintessentially Iranian, for example, just as Ki-duk's are Korean, Linklater's are American and Maddin's are Canadian (and around and around we go). But there's far more to them than mere nationalistic labels, and that's an important difference. There is, however, little more to *Somersault* and *Tom White* than their status as Australian pictures, and I would argue that the positive reaction of the Australian critics thus far can be put down – almost completely – to their being this year's apparent "saving graces" for the industry.

There's a distinct difference between the 'cultural mission' shared by these two films and that of "global" cinema. *Somersault* and *Tom White* are concerned with nothing more than presenting, often misleadingly, the idea of Australians to Australians; *Crimson Gold* and *Samaria* are concerned with presenting actual people (who just happen to live in Iran and Korea respectively) to actual people (who may or may not live in Iran or Korea and most probably don't). The lives of actual people are more important than the lives of broadly drawn caricatures, and these "global" filmmakers talk *with* us, where Australian filmmakers, for far too long now, have talked *at* us.

Conclusion (Take Heed* The Ister*)

The best and most significant Australian feature of the year thus far (and I don't see a better one coming along, to be honest) has been *The Ister* (David Barison and Daniel Ross, 2004), and I make this judgement based on both the quality of the film itself and on its importance to Australian filmmaking. The film's remarkable content and form aside, *The Ister* could well become a milestone in a new era of autonomy and creative freedom in the Australian cinematic landscape, if only we allow it to be – it's a fine example of what Australian filmmakers can do when they start to think outside the square they live in. This feature, which is based on a 1942 series of lectures by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (now *that's* a pitch to take to the AFC) was made without any government assistance at all. Love it or loathe it (and most responses are indeed extreme ones), here are two filmmakers that one cannot help but admire: they were able to make a 189-minute video-essay that relies heavily on audience 'participation' without a dollar of government funding, only to have Adrian Martin call it "the most intellectually rigorous and searching film ever made in this country" (5). Now, *that's* success. And *The Ister*'s a revelation.

One can only begin to imagine the number of singular and original films (narrative or otherwise) that could potentially get made in this country if more of our filmmakers would just sit up, open their eyes and see that they have a greater chance of making the films that they want to make if they were to bypass the traditional means of film financing and distribution. This is the first hurdle – and a fairly major one, admittedly – but clearing it makes the second, that of content, much easier to approach (after all, political agendas mean that the two are practically joined at the hip). Of course, not every film needs to be as commercially unattractive as *The Ister* might appear to be, but similarly the Australian audience (to whom films like *Somersault* try and sell their dubious representations of Australian life) need not be looked upon as the be-all-and-end-all when it comes to why a film gets made in this country either. Autonomy from the system – artistically, at least – is a more-than-viable option.

Of course, this isn't to suggest that all of our problems would automatically go away if the funding bodies suddenly ceased to exist and if everyone took up microbudget filmmaking for a living. Certainly, mediocre films would still be getting made. But something must be done, and soon, and this here is but one possible solution of (hopefully) many. Creative freedom like that which is not readily available to filmmakers in this county (through the standard channels of film financing, at least) may not cure the disease, but it might just send it into remission.

The gatekeeper of Australian cinema is the government and its funding bodies – restrictive, oppressive and overly conservative – and the “saving grace” for both the Australian industry and its cinema as an art form is not a disappointing prestige picture once or twice a year. Instead, it's the long overdue death of this gatekeeper and his agenda – a death that films like *The Ister* could, should and hopefully might just signify the beginning of.

l'Humanité

25 January 2005

L'homme sans qualités

Primé lors du dernier Festival international du documentaire de Marseille, le beau film de David Barison et Daniel Ross, réalisé d'après des conférences de Martin Heidegger, est présenté demain 26 janvier à 18 heures au Centre Pompidou à Paris.

The Ister

Film documentaire australien de David Barison et Daniel Ross (3 h 9) avec Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe et Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

En ancrant une pensée géographiquement, non pour l'illustrer mais pour accompagner le cheminement de sa réflexion, The Ister se présente comme une croisière à contre-courant du Danube, inspirée par le cycle de conférences donné par Martin Heidegger en 1942 sur l'hymne éponyme de Friedrich Hölderlin. Ister, c'est le nom donné par les Grecs au Danube, que le poète célèbre dans des vers restés inachevés servant de point de départ à la pensée de Heidegger, à laquelle le film se confronte au cours de cinq chapitres. S'y succèdent les philosophes Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe et le cinéaste et metteur en scène de théâtre Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. Chacun commente certains aspects des conférences, les replaçant au coeur de sa propre réflexion. Le prologue du film donne à voir successivement la source du Danube en Allemagne et son embouchure en Roumanie. Le voyage ensuite s'effectue à rebours, au coeur de l'actualité et des souvenirs des régions qui bordent le fleuve : l'entrée dans l'OTAN de la Roumanie et la visite de George Bush, les projets de reconstruction dans une ex-Yougoslavie dévastée, mais aussi le camp de Mauthausen, les commémorations de la guerre entre Serbes et Croates. David Barison et Daniel Ross sont soucieux de faire émerger le passé récent et parfois très ancien des images captées en 2002.

The Ister est constitué de strates, d'alluvions déposées par le fleuve au fil des ans et propose à son spectateur un patient travail d'archéologie. Différentes couches de textes et de paroles affleurent dans les intertitres et la bande-son du film : ceux de Hölderlin, lui-même fasciné par la tragédie grecque, de Heidegger et de nos guides philosophes et cinéaste, qui se sont tous déjà confrontés à Heidegger dans leurs propres ouvrages. Charriés par le fleuve, ces propos et les images s'organisent au cours de la remontée du Danube. C'est par le mythe que Bernard Stiegler nous introduit à la complexité de la pensée heideggérienne. « Un jour Zeus dit à Prométhée : " Le temps est échu de faire venir au jour les non-immortels : les animaux et les hommes. " Chaque espèce doit recevoir une qualité, garante de l'équilibre écologique de la planète. Mais quand vient le tour de l'homme, il n'en reste plus. Prométhée va alors voler le feu de l'Olympe, symbole de la technique et de la puissance de Zeus. » Cet acte fondateur sert de point de départ à une interrogation sur la nature de la technologie et son articulation avec le temps, menée par Bernard Stiegler et relayée par le questionnement de Jean-Luc Nancy sur l'essence de la politique. Loin d'être indépendantes de la réflexion des philosophes, les images dialoguent avec elle, invitant le spectateur à affronter les questions contemporaines du chômage, de l'Europe, de la guerre et de la mémoire. La force de ce lien s'affirme au coeur du film. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe entreprend de considérer la proximité de Heidegger avec les nazis et ses positions scandaleuses sur la solution finale. Les images du camp de Mauthausen, voilées par intermittences par des effets de « fondu au blanc », le bourdonnement sonore rendent compte avec justesse de ce que Lacoue-Labarthe appelle « le souffle coupé de l'humanité ».

The Ister se construit autour de cette question : comment filmer une pensée en mouvement, en construction ? Une des réponses du film se joue dans l'ordonnancement des images qui ne suit pas la linéarité du voyage. Elles l'anticipent parfois ou réapparaissent au détour d'un méandre du fleuve. Nous faisons des rencontres imprévues, nous empruntons des chemins de traverse qui, en apparence seulement, nous éloignent de notre destination. Avec une grande poésie, les réalisateurs permettent ainsi d'appréhender la complexité du monde contemporain à partir de la pensée d'un des philosophes majeurs du XXe siècle.

Gaël Pasquier

www.if.com.au

MAKING THE ISTER

By Daniel Ross
July 2004 edition

Following its world premiere at Rotterdam in January this year, documentary The Ister has been accepted into the Buenos Aries, Sydney, Marseille Documentary, Anonimul and Vancouver film festivals. On the eve of its appearance at the Melbourne International Film Festival, Daniel Ross writes for us about The Ister, the doco he made with David Barison.

Making The Ister

The journey from inception to festival premiere took, in the case of The Ister, about five years. At the beginning of that journey, we were totally unaware of the scale of the undertaking that would be required. Our odyssey probably required this initial blindness in order to get going. Furthermore, at almost every turn along the path, we chose the less direct and more arduous route.

The original motivation for The Ister was the wish to make a film that was not only about philosophy, but that was also, in itself, an act of philosophical expression. To this extent the film would not be a documentary in any ordinary sense, and we never successfully resolved the question of the film's generic classification. Films are divided between the genuses fiction and nonfiction. The former is divided into many species, which we call genres, and which are recognisable by various distinct markers. Nonfiction films, however, are called 'documentaries' without further ado. Even those bastions of the cinematic avant garde, the world's major film festivals, regularly reserve a section of their program for documentaries, into which is placed anything that does not count as a fictional film. If The Ister can be labelled a documentary, nevertheless the film goes beyond the usual conventions of the genre.

The Ister, then, is about philosophy, and is an attempt to conjoin cinematic and philosophical considerations at a reasonably sophisticated level. Both of us were interested in the philosophical tradition, and Dan was engaged in researching a doctorate on the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Eventually we came around to the idea that a particular lecture course by Heidegger offered cinematic potential, as well as being of great intrinsic interest in itself. The lecture course, delivered in 1942, concentrated on one 'hymn' by the German poet, Friedrich Hölderlin. The hymn was called 'Der Ister,' a Germanized version of an old Greco-Roman name for the Danube River.

This lecture course involved all kinds of questioning on matters about which we were interested, such as the significance of place, and the essence of technology, politics, and art. We were immediately faced with all the problems that arise with the intention to film philosophy. How can complex ideas that are so thoroughly grounded in a consideration of language possibly be conveyed without utterly sacrificing anything remotely aesthetic or cinematic? Alternatively, can philosophical thought be translated into imagery without sacrificing the philosophy and ending up merely in a philosophical 'feel'?

On the other hand, the further we researched the cinematic potential of the Danube, the more it became clear that it would be a matter of making choices. The 'river of Europe' has along its course literally hundreds of places of literary and historical interest, as anyone who has read Claudio Magris' Danube would know. At the time, the greatest practical problem we faced was the difficulty of entering Yugoslavia. That, and the fact that we decided to go to Europe without having prearranged any interviews.

So, when at the end of 1999 we bought the plane tickets from Melbourne to London, there were still many questions to which we had only vague answers at best. Our cinematic points of reference included Patrick Keiller's London and Chris Marker's Sunless, but we argued constantly about the style and format we would adopt (arguments which were both necessary and pleasurable). Things were very tight financially, as we had obtained absolutely no funding whatsoever, largely due to our fear of bureaucracy and the film's lack of 'Australian content.' We bought a Sony TRV 900 mini-DV camera and a right hand drive 1982 Bedford van. Having booked tickets on the now defunct Channel hovercraft, we made our way to Compiegne, the town north of Paris where we believed the philosophy professor Bernard Stiegler taught.

This turned out to be a remarkably fortuitous choice. Having introduced ourselves at the university, he invited us to his country maison in a few days for an interview. Not only was he incredibly generous with his time, but he also invited us to his birthday banquet that was being prepared as we interviewed. After the feast, we drove eastward through the night toward Strasbourg, and for both of us it was the moment when we first really believed we might have a film at the end of the process.

The fact that Stiegler was involved probably also influenced the other participants to take part. Some were hesitant, but nobody whom we met and invited to take part declined to do so. They seemed to find it so bizarre that a couple of guys from Australia had turned up at their door to interview them about an obscure Heidegger lecture course that they found it difficult to refuse.

At the same time we embarked on filming many and various locations along the Danube. We were rushed, and our money ran out. A sympathetic and generous Italian uncle of David's rescued us in the short term, but we could not complete our filming of the entire course of the river. In any case, we had strong doubts that our transportation would survive a trip as far as Romania (although in fact it never broke down).

Back in Melbourne we began the enormous process of sifting the material we had collected, translating the French interviews, and learning the editing software [Final Cut Pro] we would need to use. Although there was plenty we wanted to use, it became obvious after about nine months of editing that certain gaps remained. In the end another trip was necessary, which David undertook alone, covering Romania, Yugoslavia, and Croatia. This trip was even more rushed than the first, although advance planning meant the itinerary was slightly less chaotic.

The entire editing process took more time than anything else. Our biggest problem was the inconsistent quality of our audio recording, the editing and engineering of the sound being the only task for which we were forced to rely on paid professionals [sound editor Livia Ruzic and sound engineer Frank Lipson]. In some ways the fact that we were editing digitally made the process more efficient, but the myriad possibilities that this opened up enabled interminable revisions.

Even if it is a two edged sword, however, without digital recording and editing technology, the film could not have been made, at least in anything like the form it eventually took. It is because the film was produced digitally that we were free to experiment with ways of using imagery in a 'philosophical' manner. Exactly what this meant was something we could only discover in the course of doing it.

An example. One of the film's themes is the relation between memory and technology. Technology opens up realms of memory unavailable to animals, in its ability to store and transmit between generations. Every film is therefore describable as a technical apparatus of memory. In The Ister, therefore, we tried not only to acknowledge this obvious fact, but to employ stylistic devices such as the repetition of imagery to highlight the way in which not only memory but equally forgetting works. In a film where the viewer is invited constantly to question the relation between word and image, there is the additional challenge of making associations across the course of the film. The impossibility of holding everything together in one's head, and of putting all the pieces together intelligibly in one sitting, is thus itself something the audience is forced to acknowledge, and hopefully to draw conclusions from.

In this way the film is like a river, that flows in and out of the viewer, along its own inevitable course, yet open to manifold interpretations. In spite of such metaphorical aspects, however, The Ister is actually put together in a largely non-symbolic way. Rather, and as both a philosophical and aesthetic choice, the film is hopefully very 'concrete.' The interviewees speak in a manner that is at times difficult but it is clear that this difficulty is not caused by deliberate obfuscation, but rather by the complexity of what is at stake. We tried to be generous to our interviewees, to allow them the time and space to give what they have. Hopefully The Ister also adds something of its own, and maintains its own strange kind of consistency.

The Ister is intended not merely to illustrate but to provoke thought and an interest in philosophical thinking. Our main intention and hope was to find a method for communicating cinematically both the rigour of philosophy, and the awe about the world that inspires philosophy and to which it is a response. If the strange object we have created at least hints in such a direction, then we are glad that we allowed ourselves to step into the flow that carried us to this point.

The Ister: a cinematic essay on Heidegger

By Alejandro A. Vallega

(Director of the Collegium Phaenomenologicum 2004; Author of *Heidegger and the Issue of Space: Thinking on Exilic Grounds*)

The Ister is a cinematic essay that by rereading Heidegger´s famous lecture on Hölderlin's poem Der Ister engages the philosopher's thought in some of its most controversial as well as provoking aspects. The work moves through Heidegger´s lecture while, at the same time, following the trajectory of the Ister (the Danube) from Rumania to the black forest in Germany. The work's path is configured by a rich weaving of images of the Danube, its cultures and memories, of citations from Heidegger's lecture, and of discussions of Heidegger´s thought by Philippe Lacoue-Labarth, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler, and finally the filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

The film explicitly addresses Heidegger through the issue of our technological existence, the possibility and responsibility of the thought of being after the Holocaust, the sense of language in a time when myth telling no longer occurs as its foundation, and, finally, the impossibility of recovering Heidegger´s thought in light of the way these issues situate us today. As Syberberg makes clear in the last section of the film, ultimately, it is impossible for us to claim fully Heidegger´s sense of the Ister. In retrospect, it is this awareness of such impossibility that gives the work its intensity as well as its thoughtful openness; the last section leads one to the reinterpretation and questioning of the first three parts, and their attempts to engage Heidegger, in light of this impossibility. The awareness of a certain loss in the attempt to engage Heidegger´s thinking also shows the filmmakers' attentiveness to Heidegger's understanding of thinking in its finitude as an experience that takes place as a presencing and loss. It is also a sense of the finitude and irrecoverable character of the experience of thought that implicitly frames the film, as in traveling along the river's path the concrete sense of thinking is becomes more and more apparent.

The trajectory of the film, from Rumania to the various points in Germany where the Danube finds its sources, implicitly situates the issues discussed in the film in an exilic space, i.e., in a space for reflection in which any claim to the identity and determinate cultural origins of ideas have to be reconfigured in light of insurmountable differences - the lives and the cultures that gather and spring along its course, and which underlie the river's single presence. With this subtle staging of Heidegger's thought in a mise en scène of differences, The Ister exposes some of the most powerful transformative currents and possibilities at play in the philosopher's reading of the Western tradition through Hölderlin. As the film carries us along the Danube, the river's images recall the differences in which articulations of identity arise and come to pass.

The Ister's thoughtfulness lies in its encounter of Heidegger's thought in awareness of the impossibility, the loss, and the concrete differences in which philosophical thinking finds its configurations. In following Heidegger's path and bringing it to the river, The Ister opens its audience to the complexities and necessities afforded philosophy by Heidegger´s thought today. With their visually articulate commentary, Barison and Ross have made a unique contribution to the critical articulation of Heidegger's thinking, this in a time when images seldom engage thought and words often seem insufficient in their articulation of thought's movement in its loss and difference.

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Incisions on the Rock

Commentary

BY ADAM KIRSCH
August 15, 2005
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In the beginning, Western philosophy was profoundly mistrustful of the written word. Socrates was the first thinker to move beyond poetry and sophistry to what we now consider philosophy, yet his teaching was purely oral. To think with Socrates meant having dinner with him, walking home from a festival with him, or collaring him in the marketplace; he made philosophy an encounter and an experience, but not a text. That was left for Plato, his disciple, who used writing to preserve Socratic dialogues for future generations. Yet Plato himself feared that, by transforming philosophy into what it remains to this day - a matter of writing and reading, not hearing and talking - he was betraying its essence.

In his "Phaedrus," Plato records the myth of Theuth, or Thoth, the god whom the Egyptians credited with the invention of writing. Theuth urged Thamus, the king of Egypt, to teach his people how to write, claiming: "Here is an accomplishment, my lord the king, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians." But Thamus turned this boast on its head: "You who are the father of writing," he insisted, "have out of fondness for your offspring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful. ... And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality; they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant."

Today, for the first time since Plato, we are entering an era when writing may once again lose its place at the center of intellectual life. But we are not going back to the world of Socrates, where genuine thinking and teaching flourished in face-to-face encounters. In the age of television and the Internet, we are not returning to the preliterate, but descending into the postliterate. Writing may have been merely a trace of the genuine experience of philosophy, but what will happen when even the trace disappears, leaving nothing but images - the images that, to Plato, were the most transitory and untrustworthy of all things in this world of change? Can thinking take place in a visual medium?

That is the question posed, quite self-consciously, by "The Ister," a fascinating new documentary that made its debut in 2004 and has been slowly making the rounds of film festivals, art-house cinemas, and academic conferences. (Though it is available on DVD in England and Australia, screenings in the United States must be arranged through Brooklyn-based First Run Films.) "The Ister," shot on digital video by a pair of Australian graduate students, Daniel Ross and David Barison, is a nonfiction film but not a documentary, at least not in the usual sense: For while it does document many things, places, and people, its central purpose is not to record an event but to provide an experience - "not merely to illustrate but to provoke thought," in Mr. Ross's words. This high ambition makes "The Ister," which runs for three hours and took some five years to produce, an important test of whether the philosophical impulse can survive in the new world of images.

Plato's myth of Theuth offers a perfect route into the questions raised by "The Ister." For the major subject of the film is the power and danger of technology, of which Theuth, like the Greek Hermes, was the patron deity. And the filmmakers' major interlocutor, the philosopher around whom the film cautiously circles, is Martin Heidegger, whose suspicion of technology went hand in hand with a powerful challenge to conventional ways of writing and talking about ideas.

The film takes its name from a poem by Friedrich Holderlin, the late-18th century German Romantic, whose hymn to the Danube River called it by its ancient Greek name, "the Ister." More specifically, the film is inspired by a lecture course on "The Ister" that Heidegger gave in 1942,one of many he devoted to Holderlin's poetry. The formal structure of the film is simple but fertile: Camera in hand, Messrs. Ross and Barison (who never

appear onscreen) follow the course of the Danube, from its mouth on the Black Sea back to its source in Germany.

Their travelogue pays careful attention to the bridges and ships and cities they discover along the way, thus providing an illustration of Heidegger's major theme - man's imposition on Nature, in all its destructive necessity. Messrs. Ross and Barison produce several lovely tableaux - of rivers, mountains, forests - but the visual strength of the film lies not in beauty but in clever juxtaposition.

In Romania the filmmakers visit the ruins of the bridge across which Trajan's armies marched into Dacia; in Yugoslavia they show the bridge at Novi Sad, destroyed by the NATO bombing campaign in 1999; in Hungary, they find a bridge at Dunafoldvar which was attacked by the invading Soviets in 1956. Over the course of the film, and with very little nudging by the filmmakers, the figure of the bridge comes to bear the full weight of Heidegger's critique of technology: As a human intervention into Nature, it is both essential to life and bound up with violence and death.

The bridges on the Danube are products of what Heidegger, in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology," called "enframing" - a way of thinking that makes Nature subordinate to human ends. In that essay, Heidegger showed how his thought about technology relates to his thought about poetry, and specifically the poetry of Holderlin. Taking up another one of the poet's river-odes, "The Rhine," Heidegger contrasts "'The Rhine,' as dammed up into the power works, and 'The Rhine,' as uttered by the artwork, in the Holderlin's hymn of that name." The contrast speaks volumes about Heidegger's sense of the betrayal of Nature - its reticence and mystery, the essential Being that Holderlin invokes - by technology, which turns it into merely an exploitable resource.

To the great credit of Messrs. Ross and Barison, however, they do not stop at simply illustrating Heidegger's thought; they allow it to be challenged, trusting the viewer to take part in a series of complex philosophical debates. These are expounded in the interviews that make up the intellectual pith of "The Ister," a series of talks with three French philosophers - Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. (There is also an interview, much less compelling, with the pompous filmmaker Hans-Jurgen Syberberg.) Editing their questions out almost completely, Messrs. Ross and Barison allow these thinkers to elaborate on their own disagreements with Heidegger's views on technology - disagreements that spring from a fundamental indebtedness and respect. Thanks to the informality of the settings - we see Mr. Stiegler quieting his dog and blowing out candles at his birthday party - the men become more than talking heads; we take in some of their eccentricities along with their ideas.

As the filmmakers' itinerary reaches Germany, "The Ister" turns to confront another, more controversial aspect of Heidegger: his embrace of Nazism, and his seeming refusal, even after the war, to acknowledge the magnitude of its evil. His lecture on the Holderlin poem, after all, took place at the height of the Nazi period and contained admiring references to "National Socialism and its historical uniqueness." Mr. Lacoue-Labarthe devotes most of his screen time to explaining Heidegger's infamous equation of the concentration camps with "motorized agriculture," and elaborates a powerful critique of Heidegger's view of history. And Mr. Stiegler, the most charismatic figure in the film, convincingly challenges Heidegger's bleak view of technology, arguing that were it not for technology - above all, that of writing - we could not live historically at all.

This lesson, too, is implicit in Holderlin's poetry; as he writes in "The Ister":

But the rock needs incisions
And the earth needs furrows,
Would be desolate else, unabiding.

"The Ister," then, not only contains a humanistic defense of technology; it is itself part of that defense, using one of the newest media to address some of the most ancient questions. The film cannot by itself serve as an introduction to Heidegger's thought, and much is inevitably simplified and taken for granted. To fully appreciate what Messrs. Ross and Barison are up to, it is helpful to have already spent some time with Heidegger's work. But the fact that it could be made, and even distributed, is heartening testimony to the potential of a usually barren medium.

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A river runs through it: Daniel Birnbaum on The Ister.

(FILM)(Critical Essay)

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FILM

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

DANIEL BIRNBAUM ON *THE ISTER*

RIVERS HAVE no poetic power anymore, German filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg tells us in David Barison and Daniel Ross's 2004 documentary *The Ister* (now available on video). They have lost their mythic resonance and become part of the "machine" of "daily life." These days, Syberberg asserts, nobody would create a major work of art about a river, the way Richard Wagner or Friedrich Hölderlin did. Syberberg's musings appear at the very conclusion of Barison and Ross's three-hour philosophical voyage. The film traces the Danube's full course, from the Black Sea all the way to its source in southern Germany. Part rhapsodic journey replete with moments of great beauty, part tedious educational program rife with digressions on politics and history, it is not the great work of art that would prove Syberberg wrong. But it is certainly an original undertaking: a cinematic collage that turns on Hölderlin's epic "river hymn," *The Ister* (from "Istros," the ancient Greek term for the Danube), and, more pointedly, on Martin Heidegger's famous reading of it.

In Heideggerian thought, great poetry does not merely locate or interpret truth—it *produces* truth, bringing new verities into the world. "A properly unique beginning thus lies in whatever is said poetically," said Heidegger in a series of lectures on Hölderlin delivered at Freiburg University in 1942. For Heidegger, the beginning that Hölderlin's poetry points toward is also an end—the end of Western "metaphysics" and its progressive forgetfulness of Being, initiated by Plato and reaching its completion in technological modernity. What Hölderlin offers, then, is a glimpse of a world at once ancient and yet to come, in which Being as an unmediated process of "presencing" may yet be attained. This is a world far from the Freiburg of 1942, or so it would seem to us—but perhaps not to Heidegger, who joined the National Socialist party in 1933 (and became rector of the university the same year).

In addition to Syberberg, three leading French philosophers—Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Bernard Stiegler, all of whom have studied Heidegger's philosophy and confronted his politics—help Barison and Ross navigate their serpentine geographical and conceptual course. Excerpts from interviews with these four men are interspersed with shots of riverscapes—some sublime and bucolic, some postindustrial and polluted—and points of interest along the route: residents of Vokovar, Croatia, marching in remembrance of the Serb's 1991 attack on their city; May Day celebrations in Hungary; Walhalla, King Ludwig I's monument to Germanic greatness; the empty, debris-strewn lecture hall at Freiburg. Intertitles proffer quotes from Heidegger and Hölderlin and short histories of the various locales.

Stiegler, Nancy, and Lacoue-Labarthe discourse on matters political, metaphysical, mythological, poetic, technological, and ecological, intermittently returning to Heidegger and the intractable fact of his Nazi affiliation. In one sequence in the Mauthausen concentration camp near Linz, Lacoue-Labarthe quotes the most scandalous of Heidegger's postwar remarks: "Agriculture is now a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs." "I don't want to stupidly accuse Heidegger of having been a Nazi," Lacoue-Labarthe says, as if that would be too vulgar—an odd statement, since Heidegger *was* a Nazi. We know that for a fact, though we have yet to answer the great question: How could such a major philosophical mind be attracted to this kind of nationalist ideology? The film does not purport to solve the conundrum, but it does raise the interesting hypothesis that Heidegger's delusions had to do with an understanding of the German nation and its language that was, in fact, metaphysical. Heideggerian thinking has its own geography, as does the poetic universe of Hölderlin, and these territories overlap: As Lacoue-Labarthe points out, the history of the West for both of them was primarily a Greek-German affair. In such an imaginary universe, a river springing up in the Black Forest is not just a waterway but a mysterious metaphysical power: "What that one does, that river / No one knows."

Perhaps this accounts for the fact that it is not until we reach the Black Forest—real Heidegger country—and Syberberg appears, dressed in white like a latter-day Kurtz, that things get truly exciting. The creator of the magnum opus *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977) dilates on the "new Germany," which he calls a "weak and friendly" place. Something has been lost, he suggests: The glory of Germany, the most spiritual of nations, is gone; gone is Hölderlin, gone is Heidegger. If you live in this weak, friendly nation, as I do, you're especially susceptible to artists like Syberberg—artists who open the door to a world we thought no longer existed, a world of myths and heroic poetry. Syberberg's art has always tapped into these archaic energies, although on the surface it critiques the irrationalism such energies produce when unleashed. His dangerously attractive soliloquy seems a necessary finale, reminding us that *The Ister*'s true subject is not the physical river but the metaphysical geography that has been evoked by poets and thinkers to devastating and barbaric effect. Although Syberberg is fully aware of this, he can't help playing with fire. He is a mild and sophisticated man, someone I would love to get to know. Behind him, the forest whispers: "The horror, the horror." □

Daniel Birnbaum is a contributing editor of *Artforum*.

IN HEIDEGGER AND HÖLDERLIN'S IMAGINARY UNIVERSE, A RIVER SPRINGING UP IN THE BLACK FOREST IS NOT JUST A WATERWAY BUT A MYSTERIOUS METAPHYSICAL POWER.

Clockwise from left: **David Barison and Daniel Ross, *The Ister*, 2004**, still from a color video, 189 minutes. **David Barison and Daniel Ross. *The Ister*. 2004**, still from a color video, 189 minutes. Bernard Stiegler. **David Barison and Daniel Ross, *The Ister*, 2004**, still from a color video, 189 minutes. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

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Daniel Birnbaum is a contributing editor of Artforum.

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Time and the River (and Heidegger)

2 Australian filmmakers tour the Danube to unlock the mysteries of one of the 20th century's most influential thinkers

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By PETER MONAGHAN

Melbourne, Australia

What are viewers to make of a three-hour film about the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and the legacies of human development along the Danube River, technology, and violent ruptures in recent European history from the Holocaust to the collapse of communism to the breakup of Yugoslavia?

David Barison and Daniel Ross are finding that their 189-minute opus, The Ister (First Run/Icarus Films), has been winning rave reviews and awards in several countries since its debut last year -- including the French Association of Research Cinemas Prize and the Quebec Film Critics' Association Prize. Through its showings at film festivals and conferences, the ambitious project about what the Australian filmmakers describe as "the history of philosophy itself, as it struggles to conceptualize the ideas of existence, lineage, and progress that underpin European civilization's image of itself -- often at the cost of brutal, bloody exclusions" is reinvigorating a conversation among philosophers and historians of ideas as well.

The Ister takes its name from an 1803 poem by Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), about which Heidegger gave a series of lectures in 1942. The poem is among the "hymns" written by Hölderlin to glorify the philosophical legacy of ancient Greece through a mystical meditation on the Danube. (Istros was the river's Greco-Roman name.) In "The Ister," Hölderlin locates sources of natural divinity and community -- as well as the haunting presence of the gods of antiquity -- in the Danube.

Heidegger's lectures were less a direct commentary on "The Ister" than a set of reflections occasioned by it. Heidegger surveyed a number of philosophical issues, including what constitutes the notions of place and home, the rise and terrible costs of technology, humanity's relationship to nature, and the remnants of tribal wars. In their film, Mr. Barison and Mr. Ross not only examine those key aspects of Heidegger's quicksilver thought, but also revisit his complicated association with Nazism -- a connection that has dogged both his reputation and his legacy.

The film uses interviews with contemporary philosophers to ponder those subjects as it follows the Danube's course upstream from Romania through Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, and Austria to its disputed source in Germany.

By using the river as a theme, says Charles R. Bambach, a professor of arts and humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas, who is writing a book on the philosophical relationship between Heidegger and Hölderlin, The Ister creates "a visual palimpsest, a kind of cinematic hypertext" to the questions raised by river, poem, and philosophers.

By demonstrating the historical context and metaphysical subtlety of the philosopher's thought, the film also makes a substantial contribution to Heidegger studies, says Iain Thomson, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of New Mexico, who wrote the chapter on Heidegger and National Socialism for Blackwell's new A Companion to Heidegger (2005, edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall). The Ister, he says, helps "remind us that we are still far from successfully working through Heidegger's traumatic legacy for philosophy: How could perhaps the greatest philosopher of the 20th century support its most despicable political regime?"

Cafe Cinéastes

Mr. Barison and Mr. Ross hashed out much of the concept for The Ister in Mario's, a cafe in Melbourne's Fitzroy neighborhood.

Today the two young scholars cum filmmakers sit with a reporter in the same cafe to talk about Heidegger and their film. Heidegger's masterwork, Being and Time (1927), laid the groundwork for philosophy's retrieval of the "question of being" -- that is, what constitutes "being" -- for humans, ideas, nature, everything. Plato had addressed such fundamental questions in his day, but the issue had been largely ignored or taken for granted by subsequent philosophers.

"There is something clearly resistant to film in Heidegger," observes Mr. Barison. "He doesn't discuss it, not in the way other thinkers of the time engage with cinema."

Mr. Ross rushes to the defense: "But it's a caricature of Heidegger that he was antimodern. He often talks about Van Gogh, or Celan, who is the opposite of an old-style writer. Or Cézanne. And he did do a TV interview. That was a big decision."

Mr. Ross and Mr. Barison share an interest in how film can, in Mr. Ross's words, convey the way that philosophical thought "exists within a world of time and place." Mr. Ross wrote his dissertation, at the University of Melbourne, on Heidegger, and last September published Violent Democracy (Cambridge University Press), in which he argues that violence has underpinned the democratic form of government since its inception, and still does, lately in response to threats of terrorism.

Mr. Barison, a political-science graduate of the University of Melbourne, studied film briefly before working with Mr. Ross, for five years, to make The Ister. They were slowed, they admit, by endless disagreements at Mario's. And not just about Heidegger's thought. "We argued constantly about the style and format we would adopt," says Mr. Ross.

Headed Upriver

One of the big questions for the filmmakers was structure. In his poem "The Ister," Hölderlin wrote, "Yet almost this river seems to go backwards and I think it must come from the East." Mr. Barison and Mr. Ross chose to go with that poetic flow, following the Danube upstream from the Black Sea to the Black Forest.

As they journey westward and northward, the filmmakers use images of land, architecture, communal celebrations, water, and animals (including lots of ducks and snails) as a visual counterpoint to lengthy interviews with leading European intellectual successors of Heidegger -- Bernard Stiegler, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy -- and with the German filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

Armed with only a handheld video camera and no outside financing, the pair drove a 1982 Bedford van to Compiègne, north of Paris, to approach Mr. Stiegler directly. A few days later, he granted them a long interview that is one of the pivots of the film.

Mr. Stiegler's account of humanity as a technological being, from myth, to prehistory, to current times, serves as a preamble to the film. Nattily dressed and urbane, he retains much of the dash and charisma that apparently served him in a former life -- as a serial bank robber who spent 1978 to 1983 in prison for his crimes. His unusual route to academic life -- he studied philosophy in prison -- is to be the subject of the next Barison/Ross film, and the pair are also preparing translations of two of Mr. Stiegler's books.

With Mr. Stiegler on board, Mr. Nancy and Mr. Lacoue-Labarthe, both close associates of the late Jacques Derrida, agreed to take part. "They seemed to find it so bizarre that a couple of guys from Australia had turned up at their door to interview them about an obscure Heidegger lecture course that they found it difficult to refuse," Mr. Ross wrote in an essay published in the Australian magazine Inside Film.

Later came thousands of hours of editing. "We tried to punctuate the film so that if there are difficult sections, there are enough visual pleasures and stimulations that you can drift across," says Mr. Barison.

The filmmakers also interrupt the dialogue to show the viewer sites of key significance to Heidegger's controversial notion of humans as beings compromised by technology who manipulate, alter, and scar the natural world. Their camera takes in the ruins of a Greek colony in Romania; the blasted bridges of Novi Sad, which were destroyed in the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia; the "Statue Park" of discarded Communist monuments in Hungary; King Ludwig I of Bavaria's Walhalla temple, built to mark the kinship of Germany and ancient Greece; and the Mauthausen concentration camp.

The Dark Past

That visual relief, and the slow pace of the film, are necessary if viewers are to fully understand its examination of Heidegger's work, even with the extensive commentary from Mr. Stiegler, Mr. Nancy, and Mr. Lacoue-Labarthe. In fact, the three French philosophers grapple with Heidegger's thought as much as they explicate it, adding further layers of complexity.

Yet the pauses also serve to add depth to the film. For instance, the references to Mauthausen and to Mr. Syberberg's confrontational 1978 film, Our Hitler: A Film From Germany, bring the most controversial aspect of Heidegger's career -- his association with National Socialism -- into the current of The Ister.

In 1933, elated by the National Socialists' seizure of power, Heidegger ended his inaugural address as rector of the University of Freiburg with a spirited "Heil, Hitler." He remained a party member until after World War II. That link between Heidegger and the Nazis remained a difficult point for scholars through subsequent years and sparked what is known as the Heidegger Controversy -- a fierce debate in the late 1980s over renewed and more-damaging attention to Heidegger's "political mistakes." It was a polemic that called into question, for some, the feasibility of embracing not only Heidegger's thinking but any philosophical movement influenced by it.

The Ister plays a valuable role, observers say, in retrieving the Heidegger debates from biographical attacks and putting them back on a more reasoned and nuanced philosophical plane.

Most dramatic, certainly, is the contribution of Mr. Lacoue-Labarthe, who has collaborated with Mr. Nancy and like him is a key figure in Heidegger studies. That his thoughts on Heidegger's politics remain in flux is clear in The Ister. Summarizing theses he developed in his 1987 book, translated in 1990 as Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political (Blackwell), Mr. Lacoue-Labarthe grapples with Heidegger's most infamous, 1949 statement: "Agriculture is now a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs."

Mr. Lacoue-Labarthe explicates how Heidegger's comment may have derived logically from contemporary events and his notion that technologies of industry, agriculture, and war had distorted humankind. But Mr. Lacoue-Labarthe's discomfort is obvious in the film. Worrying an unlit cigarette, and seeming to search for words, he finally acknowledges that the statement remains morally reprehensible. "The scandal leaps out at you," he says.

Still, says Mr. Thomson, of New Mexico, Mr. Lacoue-Labarthe does demonstrate in the film, as he did in his book, that "Heidegger's supposedly damning 'silence' on the Holocaust or Shoah is in fact a myth." He does this, says Mr. Thomson, by describing Heidegger's belief that "he had articulated the philosophical perspective necessary for comprehending the death camps: The death camps represented an extreme and thus revealing expression of the technological understanding of being."

Indeed, as Heidegger wrote the lectures on "The Ister" in 1942, the Nazis were putting their "final solution" into place, the United States was entering the war, and Germany's invasion of Russia was stalled. Yet Heidegger hailed "the stellar hour of our commencement" in his lectures.

Mr. Bambach, of the University of Texas at Dallas, says that Heidegger found a glimmer of glory in that dark time because of Hölderlin's suggestion that "at the very origin of being there is strife, conflict, opposition that provides a hidden unity." Mr. Bambach believes that Mr. Ross and Mr. Barison tried valiantly, but not completely successfully, to capture such elusive, mythopoeic concepts on film, including, as he describes it, the delusion of "Heidegger's political metaphysics of the homeland and its failed, deadly ideology of autochthonic exclusion."

Other Heidegger experts are more generous. The film is "vivid, nuanced, and properly balanced on the complex questions of Heidegger's thought, his political engagements, and the general spirit attaching to these issues," says Lawrence J. Hatab, a professor of philosophy at Old Dominion University.

As that response signals, not all Heidegger scholars take Heidegger's alignment with Nazism as cause for disqualification of his entire thought and significance. They take account -- indulgently or sensibly, depending on whom one asks -- of his times, and his thought's transcendence of them.

The film "seems to approach the political in the most useful way, in terms of what the context of the time can tell us about Heidegger's work, and what Heidegger's work can tell us about the context of the time," says Stuart R. Elden, a lecturer in geography at the University of Durham, in England. Mr. Elden's latest book on Heidegger, Speaking Against Number: Heidegger, Language and the Politics of Calculation, will be published by Edinburgh University Press later this year.

Several Heidegger experts speak of the Barison-Ross film as a kind of redress of the brutal treatment that Heidegger's legacy received, deservedly or not, at the time of the Heidegger Controversy. Says Alejandro A. Vallega, a visiting lecturer in philosophy at California State University at Stanislaus, and a leading Heidegger authority: "The film does a great service, since it does not fail to recognize the issue of Heidegger's political involvement while not obscuring or reducing the complexity and force of the thought we find in Heidegger's work."

Bringing Being to Film

Addressing Heidegger's legacy in context is one thing. But any film on philosophy has a better chance of engaging its audience if its images are not just compelling, but provide some weight and a grounding for the discussion. In The Ister, the filmmakers use images of Mauthausen, Walhalla, and the Danube's ecology to give Heidegger's philosophy a visual shape and urgency.

Mr. Thomson, for instance, says that "the film might help show viewers that the questions at stake in Heidegger's work are not incomprehensibly abstract but rather real, immediate, and pressing: How is technology shaping our sense of reality? How does our relationship to the past shape our relationship to the future? What role should philosophers play in the culture? How could someone so philosophically intelligent be so politically stupid? What is the relationship between philosophy and politics?"

The film also embraces the metaphysical nature of Heidegger's thought. In a review of The Ister, Mr. Vallega wrote that the film impressively addresses "the possibility and responsibility of the thought of being after the Holocaust" and "the sense of language in a time when myth telling no longer occurs as [language's] foundation." And, he said, the filmmakers had made this contribution "in a time when images seldom engage thought, and words often seem insufficient in their articulation of thought's movement in its loss and difference."

There have been some quibbles and complaints about the film, however. Several observers say that Mr. Stiegler's reading of Heidegger, however charming, is often superficial or confused. Other experts would have liked Mr. Barison and Mr. Ross to include more about Heidegger's themes of das Fremde, the foreign, and das Eigene, that which is one's own. Heidegger argued that one cannot know home without knowing the foreign. As Jonathan L. Dronsfield, the director of the Centre for Contemporary Art Research at the University of Southampton, puts it, "Only after we have experienced the possibility of not knowing ourselves or being destroyed, to the point of self-sacrifice, do we have a sense of ourselves."

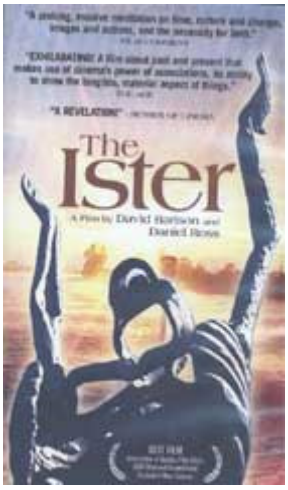
Mr. Dronsfield particularly likes another irony in The Ister: It is a film about a philosopher who, in his "Ister" lectures, lamented that "Americanism" and mechanization, particularly cinema, were coming to negate "living experience" of art.

Near the film's end, Mr. Syberberg, the German film director, suggests that Germany no longer has room for a Heidegger, nor a Hölderlin. The filmmakers echo this idea by refraining from using any image of Heidegger almost until the film's closing frames. Then they include a portrait that seems to be etched in fiery granite. "This face," says Mr. Barison, "is not simply an image of Heidegger, but an image in stone of something that is lost."

Unfortunately, says Mr. Hatab, of Old Dominion University, when it comes to public debates on Heidegger, "blatantly biased attacks and apologies" both make it "impossible to overcome the caricatures and established convictions about Heidegger's politics and its relation to his overall thought." He adds, "There is much to learn from Heidegger and much to challenge him on, but the public discourse is now a hopeless farce."

He says he found Mr. Barison and Mr. Ross's film anything but that: "I found it very moving."

The Ister



2004
Produced by David Barison and Daniel Ross
Directed by David Barison and Daniel Ross
Distributed by First Run/Icarus Films, 32 Court St., 21st Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11201; 800-876-1710
VHS, color, 189 min.
Reviewed by Cheryl Danieri-Ratcliffe

Rating: Recommended
Audience Level: Sr. High - Adult
Subject(s): Philosophy, History, Technology, Ecology, Holocaust and Genocide Studies
Date Entered: 8/26/2005

There are a whole series of reasons why this film should not succeed. First, it was made by two young Australian intellectuals, neither of whom had any previous experience in filmmaking, who arrived in Europe to begin filming with no clear idea of how to shoot it and with no outside funding. They bought a hand-held Sony mini-DV camera and a twenty-year-old bread van and set out to capture images along the nearly two thousand mile course of the Danube river and to carry out interviews in which they gave what should have been the dangerous privilege of allowing three French university professors and a German filmmaker generous time to expound upon what seem to be prepared answers to questions they were asked. Bernard Stiegler, a philosopher, is given the largest share of time talking at length in French and adding irritating brief sentences in English to the accompaniment of off-screen noises and interruptions.

Second, it addresses complex issues in philosophy and thus poses the dilemma of how abstract ideas can be presented in images as well as in sound in a film documentary. Worse, it grapples with the work and legacy of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a philosopher whose thinking was not only complex – he himself once appropriately wrote that "making itself intelligible is suicide for philosophy" – but remains highly controversial. His influence can be traced in existentialism, deconstructionism, and hermeneutics but even there this influence remains ambiguous: he himself contested the existentialist Sartre's interpretation and, although they have been greatly influenced by his work, each of the three philosophers interviewed in the film also contest facets of his thinking. In any case, Heidegger's work is muddied by his links to National-Socialism – he joined the party in 1933 and, following Germany's defeat in 1945 never came to condemn the Third Reich in general and the Holocaust in particular. How could such an outstanding twentieth-century philosopher give support to the century's most abhorrent regime? The answer to this question remains hotly debated.

Despite all these seemingly insurmountable difficulties, this brave, original, and well-crafted film has met with critical acclaim and considerable success with audiences at film festivals, though, inevitably, it has not found a place on the commercial circuit. Why is this so? It succeeds against the odds because Barison and Ross, its directors, began with a shared interest in philosophy and an admiration for Heidegger – Ross was already writing a doctoral thesis on him – and a willingness to spend five years on a labour of love. It works for another reason: Heidegger is text and pretext. The film does not attempt an exposition of the German thinker's ideas, some of which changed over time, but discusses issues – modernity, technology and culture, memory and forgetting, Being and anxiety, ecology and politics – that Heidegger raised in his work as a whole and which, of course, remain critical issues in our world. Their discussion also benefits from their good fortune in securing the collaboration of their four principal interviewees – three of whom, Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, are leading, if critical, exponents of Heidegger's philosophy and prove better able to explain ideas to a general public than we have a right to expect from French academics. Lacoue-Labarthe also addresses the equation between high-tech agriculture, Nazi gas chambers and the Hydrogen bomb that Heidegger infamously and ambiguously made in 1949. In the film's final sequences, the fourth interviewee, the German filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, best known for *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977), makes challenging comments on his country's past and present. Yet another reason why *The Ister* works is that Barison and Ross chose to anchor their film on Heidegger's reflections in lectures he gave in 1942 on an unfinished poem of the same name the German Friedrich Hölderlin wrote in the first decade of the previous century (lectures, incidentally, that were only published in 1984 and in American translation in 1996). *The Ister* is the Greco-Roman name for the Danube and the filmmakers use their shots of the river to illustrate and highlight issues raised by their discussants. By judicious editing, they do so in sometimes humorous and

usually stimulating ways and construct a metaphysical journey from where the river flows in the Black Sea in Romania back to its source in the Black forest in southern Germany, near Heidegger's birthplace. By felicitous filming they capture critical moments and places along the Danube that reflect triumphs and tragedies in past and present: May Day in the steel city that used to be called "Stalintown" in Hungary; a site of NATO bombing in Yugoslavia, the arrival of the Peace Train at Vukova in Croatia that commemorates one recent conflict in the Balkans; the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria; the Danube festival in Regensburg… Despite the brilliant editing and clever filming, *The Ister* grapples with difficult if fundamental issues, especially about man and machine, memory and identity, and the pace is necessarily slow. Even though there is an intermission, it still lasts over three hours and is not easy to watch. For its daring and challenging nature, though, it is well worth the effort and no-one comes out of the experience without having been made to think. *The Ister* is, as Lévi-Strauss said in another context, "good to think."

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To begin with a disclosure. I know these guys. Especially Dan Ross, who I went to university with in Melbourne, and watched turn many a competent teacher into a quivering, stammering, self-contradictory mess. It was clear even then that he would make some kind of strategic impact on the world, but we would have to wait a decade until his various traits and talents congealed into something tangible. At that time Dan appeared incredibly pedantic and perverse to some, whereas others considered him rigorous and forthright. But one thing was for sure: if Mr. Ross was in the room, people were going to be enlightened - whether they wanted to be or not - and feathers were going to be ruffled.

In the heady year of 2000, Dan and his good friend David Barison - a rather suave, and linguistically-gifted accomplice - embarked on a conceptual adventure: buying a Sony mini-DV camera and two return tickets to Europe. They arrived in London, bought a van, and headed across to the Continent with a definite plan in mind.

Four years later, and I was sitting in a theatre at the Rotterdam Film Festival, nervously awaiting the premiere of *The Ister*, the ultimate result of that low-budget, high-brow road trip. I was nervous on behalf of my friends, who had been flown to Holland to attend and answer questions after the screening, since I was afraid that the movie would be a painfully pretentious and agonizingly dull endurance test. After all, it ran over three hours, and wasn't exactly the sexiest or raciest of genres: the philosophical-film essay. Still, I hoped that what it lacked in seductive starlets and CGI explosions, it would more than make up for in brain-food.

Five minutes into the screening, my apprehension turned into fascination, and a clammy sense of envy at what my friends had managed to achieve. (After all, I had gone the traditional route - publishing words which only a handful of people would read - whereas they had travelled the slow, scenic route, and produced something far more immediate, rewarding and accessible.) It was soon obvious that this was not going to be an earnestly tedious public TV documentary, but an intensely engaged and exquisitely crafted portrait of the Big Questions: Being, War, Ethics, Politics, Technology, and - yes - even The Meaning Of Life.

Before I get to the film itself, I should probably mention the H-word. The elephant in the room. Since this is the inspiration behind the whole project.

Heidegger. Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher with a penchant for lederhosen and circular sentences, who is now - three decades or so after his death - as revered as he is reviled in the intellectual world. A week or so before the premiere at Rotterdam, specialized pockets of the internet were buzzing with the heated debate surrounding this figure: a man who gained much by going with the Nazi flow in 1933, and yet managed to simultaneously build a body of work which has more than enough material to think through the evils of this period (which, in many stark and striking ways, continues into our own). In other words, Ross and Barison had woken up some barely slumbering dogs, which had been yapping at each others slobbering chops since the "Heidegger controversy" broke in 1989, when the extent of his National Socialist affiliations were brought under serious scrutiny throughout Europe.

Several other spirits haunt *The Ister*, and this inevitable haunting is one of the dominant themes in the film itself. Hölderlin, the late 18th and early 19th century poet whose composition of the same name inspired a lecture series by Heidegger, casts a luminous shadow over proceedings. The Ister, after all, is the name the Ancient Greeks gave to the Danube, and provides the key Hellenic-Germanic axis for the historical trajectory of not only the river itself, but the film's narrative. Indeed, if we were to list the phantom cast of the film, it would look something like this: Prometheus, Epimetheus, Hephaestus, Antigone, Agnes Bernauer ("the German Antigone"), Plato, Aristotle, Goethe, Hölderlin, Benjamin, Heidegger, Derrida, Agamben.

And Terrence Malick.

Malick, whose three films to date - *Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), and *The Thin Red Line* (1998) - happen to be three of the best films ever made, was influenced in his own way by Heidegger, having translated *The Essence of Reason*. Malick then took an Easterly detour through Indian spirituality, before returning to Western-inflected obsessions with war, violence and sacrifice. Malick's films are not only about people and problems, but animals and other elements of life which are sidelined by humanist egocentrism. *The Ister* begins and ends with a similar "wide-angled" approach, in the metaphysical sense: with a close-up of a duck on the banks of the Danube, plus cutaways to dogs, slugs, and mating bugs. As one of the interviewees notes, in our time, Nature has become a phantasm.) This approach, whereby "culture" is the new nature, also shares the inclusive, contemplative spirit of films by Chris Marker, Errol Morris, and Patrick Keiller.

The format loosely fits the "road movie" category, since the film follows the Danube "backwards" from its mouth at the Black Sea, through Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Austria, and finally to its (disputed) source in Germany. There are a couple of detours, most notably, Strasbourg; the home of both the brilliant philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, and the new experiment in post-nationalist justice, the European Court. The Germans in fact have a useful word for this burgeoning genre: *wasserstrasse*, or "water-road," and other extraordinary movies have been metaphysical journeys along rivers. (Herzog's *Aguirre Wrath of God* (1972)and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) being the most celebrated; both taking their cues from Conrad's novel, *The Heart of Darkness*.) *The Ister*, for its part, seeks Germany as both the heart of darkness (in terms of the Holocaust), and the heart of lightness (in terms of a Greek-guided Enlightenment). Of course, the two are utterly implicated in the other, and the film goes a long way to avoid default readings of these events as "black and white" (or indeed, making trite conclusions like this one, that such events are simply "two sides of the same coin.")

During this journey, the filmmakers made their own luck. Or rather, in keeping with Heidegger's vocabulary, their own "destiny.") Simply by embarking on this task, they both created and stumbled upon the kind of serendipitous encounters which make this film all the richer. For instance, it is mostly luck that they arrived in Romania the day that this struggling country was inducted into NATO, and visited by George W. Bush.

It was also luck that they arrived on Bernard Stiegler's doorstep on his 48th birthday, allowing some poignant pictures to accompany this philosopher's thoughts on mortality and indeterminate time.

And luck again when they encountered a botanist in a cemetery garden, who could give them some extra-human perspective on the river, on a larger, geophysical time-scale. So when this kind of luck is combined with good research and intelligence - for instance, spending May Day in "Stalintown," the Danube festival in Regensburg, and "Peace-Train Day" between Zagreb and Vukovar - you have a very special palette to work with.

The pace is languid and leisurely, yet the film covers an amazing amount of ground/water in 200 minutes. (Each stated location is measured in kilometres from the Danube's official source in Donauschingen.) Some scenes encourage the viewer to lapse into a meditative trance; watching the river from the back of a boat, dissolving into a spectacular sun-set. Others involve a more straight-forward interview style, with the four main subjects: Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Hans Jurgen Syberberg. Only those with an interest in continental philosophy will have heard of these people, but *The Ister* assumes no prior knowledge to the issues and debates, and these thinkers turn out to be more charismatic and illuminating than you might expect from old-school deconstructionists.

Of course, each man has his own style. Stiegler is gregarious and effusive, bringing mythology and philosophy to life for a lay audience. Indeed, his performance is all the more fascinating if you know the back-story (not told in the film), that he in fact spent several years in jail for a series of armed bank robberies. (A "career" he pursued after becoming disillusioned with the post-1968 capitulation, but one now left behind, after becoming a public intellectual and director of major media institutions in France.) Nancy is stylish and eloquent, dressed all in black, yet having visible difficulty swallowing, due to health complications. Lacoue-Labarthe is the most tortured of the interviewees, visibly struggling with the scandalous paradoxes of Heidegger, as well as with his addiction to nicotine. Indeed, Lacoue-Labarthe's fondness for cigarettes forms an interesting supplement to his theory that - post-1945 - humanity is "out of breath." This section of the film also caused a controversy recently in France when some audience members thought that zooming in on Lacoue-Labarthe's ash-tray was a sick joke played on the victims of the gas-chambers. Despite the controversy, or perhaps even because of it, *The Ister* won the prestigious "Prix du Groupement National des Cinémas de Recherche" at the Marseille International Documentary Festival, 2004.

By selecting these interviewees, the filmmakers unpack the significance of the fact that it is still anathema to mention Heidegger in Germany, and yet his legacy has been taken up nearby, especially in France. As Australians (an exceedingly fraught category, informed in its own way by European hubris) Ross and Barison add their voices to the contemporary chorus on the origin of nationalism, and the rather arbitrary historical lines we draw between the familiar and the foreign.

When I first started telling people about *The Ister*, the reaction was usually very suspicious. After all, a couple of Australians trying to locate the philosophical source of modernity in Germany sounds just about as kosher and commendable as those god-awful European anthropologists who go to Australia in order to make a film about the Aboriginal Dreamtime. "It sounds so terribly cheesy," said one eminent critical theorist; while another stated: "Just what we need. Aussie cheerleaders for a Euro wankfest over the legacy of a Nazi."

Harsh words, but ones worth considering as a general counter-weight to the tendency of hardcore Heideggereans to disappear up the anus of their own "patient harkening to the voice of Being." Indeed, I remember reading somewhere that Heidegger is guaranteed to cause constipation in his readers. (Whereas Benjamin serves as a sure-fire laxative.) These attacks, however, are usually made on the very notion of the project, without seeing the film itself; which - I would argue - carries its own checks and balances against simply yelling out: "Gimme an H. Gimme an E." And so on.

Perhaps the key word when it comes to circling the whole Ister concept is "pretension." For me, pretension is something which should only be measured by the distance between an effect an artist seeks to create, and the failure to reach that effect. If somebody wants to do something that initially sounds pretentious because of its grandiose ambitions, and yet succeeds in creating something very special, then that piece of work is not pretentious. Radiohead and Björk are not pretentious, because they manage to put their talent where their mouth is. Even if it doesn't happen to be your cup of tea. They follow their convictions and go all the way, creating an "invisible remainder" all the while. In contrast, Placebo and Muse are pretentious, because they aim for something far higher than they can possibly achieve. In any case, you get my point. If something doesn't make you cringe and wince, then it isn't really pretentious. In fact, that term is used all too often in order to escape art which make a serious demand of you, the audience. How much more comfortable it would be to check your brain at the door and watch *Spiderman 2* or *Dodgeball*. (Not that I have any problem with mindless fare either, so long as it's funny. After all, I'd rank the Farelly brothers' *Kingpin* higher than Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*.)

And while we are on the subject, *The Ister* is by no stretch of the imagination, funny. (With the notable exception of Stiegler's eccentric-professor antics, a quick reference to a canine imposter, and some dry humour just at the end, concerning the debated source of the Danube . . . a nice wink from the film-makers for sticking with them the entire journey.) Even with an intermission, there was noticeable bum-shifting in the audience by the time we approached the tiny Black Forest hut in which Heidegger wrote *Being and Time*.

Three hours in, and some people looked as weary as Syberberg, discussing the melancholy loss of poetry, rivers, and - specifically - poetic rivers. This film asks a lot, in terms of attention and concentration. But it rewards that attention with ideas and images which will stick with you, and make you see things in a different, more expansive, light.

For instance? Well, despite looking rather tired, Syberberg makes some interesting points about "the spirit of machines," and Heidegger's realization that simply considering oneself as "anti-technology" (as many movements do today) misses the essential question concerning our complex relationship with machines. There is indeed a spirit of machines, says Syberberg, but this "is not the camera in the watercloset . . . watching what the woman does there . . . in the watercloset."

Well put.

The Ister is, overall, a triumph of editing. The film has a fugue-like quality and structure, where images repeat, and yet suddenly have a completely different meaning, due to the shift in context. Buildings which seem to be innocuous enough on first viewing, turn out to be the Mauthausen concentration camp. A young boy smiling, shy-yet-proud, creates one impression during a discussion about patriotism, and quite a different impression when the theme is Oedipal tragedies. And this is most explicit when two montages are juxtaposed: one entitled The Necessity of Remembering, the other entitled The Necessity of Forgetting. Both, in fact, are almost the same montage (with one significan difference), and yet they create diametrically opposed emotions in each case.

Indeed, it is the editing which lends a kind of hyper-significance to the images, along with the voice-overs by the interviewees. Jet trails, fallen trees, and waddling ducks all suddenly acquire a new resonance when viewed through the optic of techno-ontology. A section concerning the co-habitation of different epochs is nicely illustrated with a row-boat near a hydro-electric dam, and an oil-tanker. The heavily slowed-down sequence of fairground rides creates a mesmerizing form of temporal vertigo, underlining the fact that *The Ister* itself is an "untimely" film (while remaining a topical one). There is even an almost subliminal Malick-inspired flashback to the ghosts of lovers past.

But if I were forced to make a criticism, it would be a very minor one: that the proliferation of busts from Germany's Hall of Liberation is a less than polished effect, which draws attention to the fact that this film is a DIY-job. Usually this doesn't matter, since the noises-off camera, and other unplanned elements, add an aura of authenticity to proceedings. They are the grain in the wood; the pulp in the juice. But in this case - as well as the camera work for some of the gravestones - comes across as a little amateur. However, this is a rather churlish gripe, given the painstaking attention given not only to the editing decisions, but the understated-yet-effective use of sound and music. (Note the use of shortwave radio signals during the section on Hermes the messenger.) A lot of thought also went into translating the French and German into English. I should also mention the inspired scene where Stiegler goes outside to shoosh his "chien," only to return twenty minutes later, to take up the thread of his monologue, without missing a beat.

This film proves its own argument (or at least Stiegler's argument), that technology in inextricable from poetic expression and human truth-making (*Dichtung* - in Heidegger speak). Thanks to affordable software and equipment, we now have the prosthetic means to bequeath our individual thoughts and memories to extra-genetic memory. That is, to the mediasphere. Or to the "world" (a simple notion with an astonishingly complex meaning).

The film's ultimate message, if I can be so vulgar, is that things are complicated. Heidegger talked of the "greatness" and "glory" of National Socialism, and yet he was romantically linked with

Hannah Arendt, one of the most passionate and intelligent people to perform critical autopsies on its logic, methods and repercussions. He refused to apologize for his complicity with Hitler's program, and yet he has thought more deeply than almost anybody else about the implications of modernity and massacre, and the ways in which those who simply condemn Nazism - without thinking further on the insidious legacy of its techniques - are caught in the vortex of hypocrisy and willful blindness.

You won't see *The Ister* at your local multiplex, or even your local arts cinema, since it has yet to secure distribution outside the festival circuit. Neither is it a great date movie, unless you happen to be courting Susan Sontag. Then again, after the premiere in Rotterdam, our intrepid directors were enjoying the company of not one, but *two* lovely Siberian girls. So perhaps it is a good date movie in the less superficial regions of the world; where topics such as mortality, truth and destiny can still hold the attention of a beautiful woman.

And so, in short, I would recommend *The Ister* to anybody interested in philosophy, politics, history, geography, archaeology, mythology, technology, media, art, poetry, and even structural engineering. It goes a long way in not only explaining, but also capturing (*Eregnis*?) what it means to live as part of a species-without-qualities, when "time is out of joint."

Indeed, I would be interested to see what *other* species would make of this film. And for this reason I am considering lobbying NASA and the UN to include a copy with the next batch of human materials which are carefully selected to be blasted in to space, as representative of the overlords of this small, blue planet. Perhaps the aliens that find this probe, and happen to have the correct DVD region coding to watch *The Ister*, will appreciate the irony of including a film which questions the techno-humanist logic which launches such probes in the first place.

Ross's star will continue to rise with the publication of his first book, *Violent Democracy*, out through Cambridge University Press later in 2004. Barison, for his part, is measuring up options for either a second film, or a television series on similar themes.

No doubt more feathers are going to be ruffled.

Thankfully.

Dominic Pettman

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'Along the Danube and into the deep end'
By Lawrie Zion

IT is more than three hours long and explores the theories of a German philosopher while wending its way up a European river.

A challenging package, you might think, even by the relatively adventurous standards of a film festival audience.

Yet this film, called The Ister, has been playing to packed houses everywhere from Rotterdam to Sydney and Melbourne. Few people have seen anything like it before.

Made by a pair of Melburnians armed with little more than a digital camera and a sense of inquiry, The Ister is loosely based on a wartime lecture delivered by ex-Nazi Martin Heidegger on one of Germany's most celebrated poets, Friedrich Holderlin, whose poem The Ister (an old Roman name for the Danube river) is another source of inspiration for the documentary.

But as we meander along the Danube from the Black Sea to the source of the river in Germany's Black Forest, more than 2000km upstream, the film offers a much broader series of connections and meditations from contemporary philosophers, as well as a Serbian engineer and a German botanist.

The idea arose from a PhD thesis that one of the film-makers, Daniel Ross, had written about Heidegger. Like his co-director David Barison, Ross was interested in making a film that might become part of a philosophical discourse rather than a mere commentary about a particular person's ideas.

Having bounced ideas around over thousands of coffees at Mario's in Melbourne's Fitzroy, the pair decided to embark on what would become a unique collaboration and headed for one of Europe's most famous waterways, which bears the scars of recent, as well as ancient, history.

But writing a thesis is one thing, making a film quite another. Not surprisingly, there were some difficult choices to make when it came to organising the material they gleaned from extensive road (and river) trips.

Ross was concerned that it be intellectually coherent.

"In the back of his mind was, 'What if Jacques Derrida sees this?'" Barison says.

He admits they had not decided on a stylistic approach when they started out, although he was inspired by a documentary called London and by the films of Terence Malick, who was also a Heidegger scholar before he became a film-maker.

It was important to give the film a structure and "a certain poetry" that would make its abstract ideas palatable to a broad audience.

This isn't to deny the film's intellectual rigour, especially in relation to Heidegger, who is the subject of extended commentaries from French philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Bernard Stiegler -- a genial middle-aged man with a colourful collection of cravats

who became a philosopher in the 1970s while doing five years behind bars for a series of bank robberies.

Barison acknowledges that Heidegger was and remains a problematic figure. But he also believes that "it's too easy to say this guy was a Nazi and that everything he felt was rubbish -- end of story.

"So much of what he was talking about seems completely contemporary -- like his discussions of technology, which ... seem to become more possibly true by the day, especially with regard to the relationship between the human and technical."

For Barison, a political science graduate, former PR consultant and -- briefly -- a film student, the five-year process of making The Ister without external funding had its ups and downs. What sustained him was a love of the material, and the fact that he and Ross enjoyed "arguing and interpreting things ad nauseam. We have a lot of cultural reference points in common. All he has to do is mention a couple of words from GoodFellas and I know what he's talking about."

The pair plan to continue their working relationship with a film about Stiegler's transformation from thief to celebrated thinker and a possible television series that examines the role of violence in democracies. They also haven't ruled out that old behemoth -- narrative fiction.

But following this Friday's screening of The Ister at the Brisbane film festival, where it is expected to sell out -- as it did recently at the Sydney and Melbourne festivals -- it is unclear when local audiences will get another chance to see this most un-Australian of Australian offerings.

"We're showing it to a whole lot of [independent] French exhibitors in October and we've also had a TV sale to Finland," says Barison, adding that he hopes SBS will broadcast the film. "It's designed to have an intermission, so it could be screened over more than one night."

It's hard to think of anything that better fits the SBS charter.

The Melbourne and Brisbane film festivals end on Sunday.