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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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Melbourne, Austral

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 Romani 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."

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