

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

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.

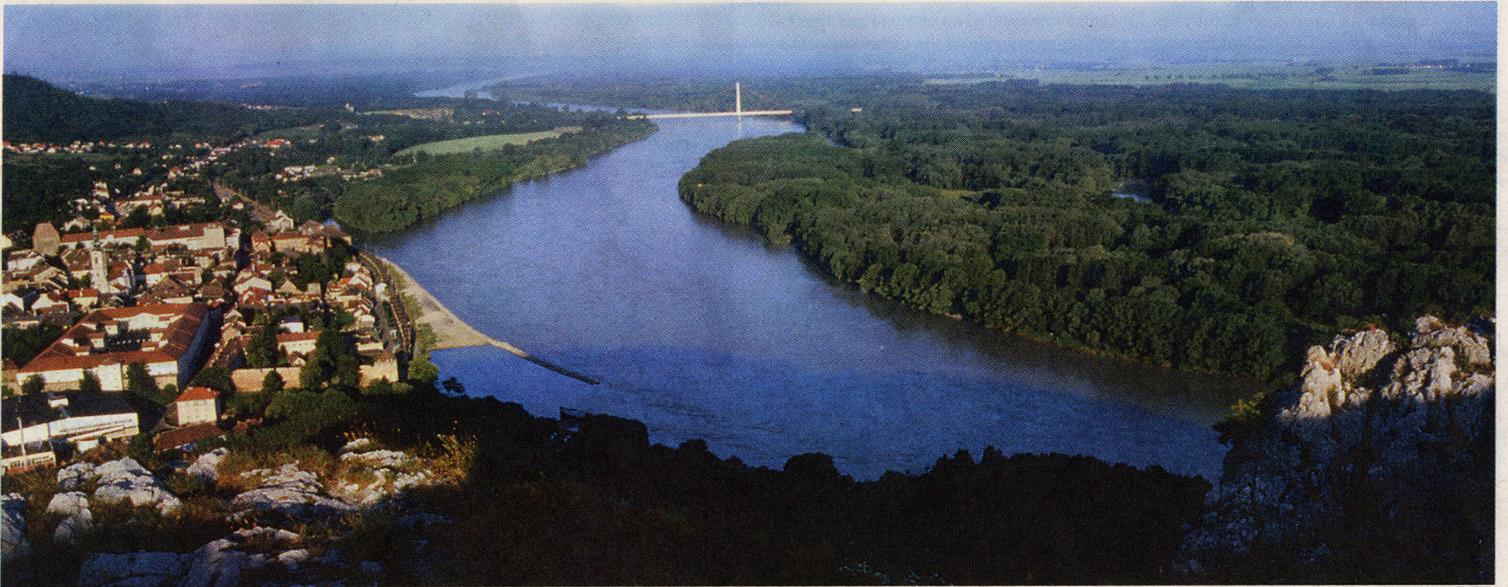
By demonstrating the historical context and metaphysical subtlety of the philosopher's thought, the film also makes a substantial contribution to Heidegger studies, says Iain Thomson, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of New Mexico, who wrote the chapter on Heidegger and National 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 CINEASTES

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



POLLEROSS/ANZENBERGER

*With its abundance of natural beauty, ancient ruins, and modern industry, the Danube River (photographed at the town of Hainburg in Lower Austria) serves as the visual centerpiece for David Barison and Daniel Ross's film, *The Ister*, about Martin Heidegger.*

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

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

"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."

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

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

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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 Cézanne, 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

RESEARCH

Continued From Preceding Page
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 "Heideg-

ger'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. Bam-



CHRONICLE PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER MONAGHAN

Daniel Ross (left, above) and David Barison (right, above), planned their film, *The Ister*, in a Melbourne cafe. Their film uses Friedrich Hölderlin's 1803 poem of that name—and the 1942 lectures about it given by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (below left)—to explore questions about technology, violence, and European history. Their film places Heidegger's thought into a broader context, including its celebration of links between Greek and German thought, symbolized by King Ludwig I of Bavaria's Walhalla (below), but it does not shy away from the philosopher's infamous association with the Nazi movement. In one scene, the camera lingers in the Aula Hall at Freiburg U. in Germany (left), where Heidegger ended his 1933 address as rector with a spirited "Heil, Hitler."



BETTMANN/CORBIS

bach 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 is-



FILM STILL'S COURTESY OF DAVID BARISON

uses," 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 Heideg-

ger'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 re-

ceived, 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

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

phew 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." ■

**"There is much to learn from Heidegger
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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."

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 philoso-

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

DANIEL BIRNBAUM ON *THE ISTER*

FILM

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).

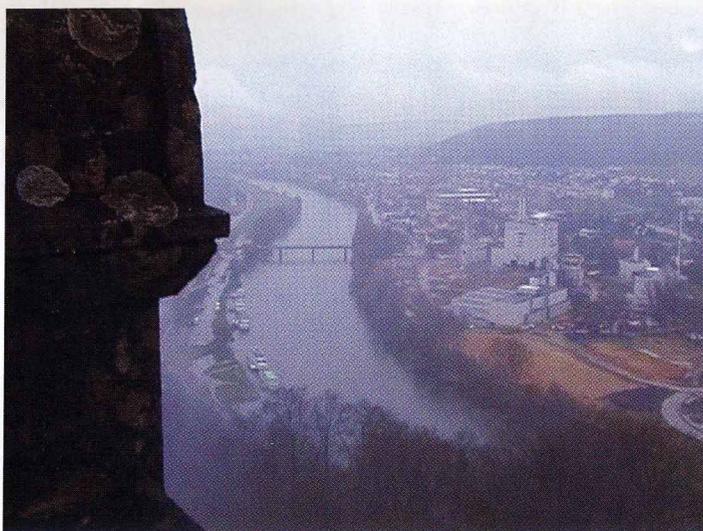
In addition to Syberberg, three leading French philosophers—Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Bernard Stiegler, all of whom have studied Heidegger's philosophy and confronted his politics—help Barison and Ross navigate their serpentine geographical and conceptual course. Excerpts from interviews 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 post-war remarks: "Agriculture is now a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the pro-

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



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.

duction 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

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*.

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.

FILM COMMENT

BY OLAF MÖLLER

On a comparable intellectual level and of similar cinematic scope, David Barison and Daniel Ross's three-hour-plus debut **The Ister** was perhaps the find of the festival, an adaptation of a 1942 Heidegger lecture on a Hölderlin poem, realized as a trip up the Danube (part of which was known as the Ister in the Roman era). The journey, from the Romanian delta, via NATO-bombed bridges in Novi Sad and the Mauthausen death camp near Linz, to the river's source in Germany, is structured around interviews with French philosophers Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, plus German filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. Ambitious, to be sure. The result is a meditation on time, culture, and change (and their ambiguities), images and actions, the necessity for both and the inherent dangers of that necessity. Like Andersen, Barison and Ross, who are Australian philosophy students, structure their film in chapters to create a complex weave. As a result, the first half hour, a classical exposition in which the film's basic ideas and images are established, seems a little too neat; but once the duo gets going, all doubt disappears. Just marvel at their use of bridges as a motif, for example.

Incisions on the Rock

'The Ister' Asks the Question: Can Thinking Take Place in a Visual Medium?

By ADAM KIRSCH

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 Hei-

degger, 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 Hölderlin, 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 Hölderlin's poetry. The formal structure of the film is simple but fertile: Camera in hand, Messrs. Ross and Barison (who never appear on-screen) follow the course of the Danube, from its mouth on the Black Sea back to its source in Germany.

Their travelogue pays careful atten-

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.

tion 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 Hölderlin. 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 Hölderlin'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 Hölderlin 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-Jürgen 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.

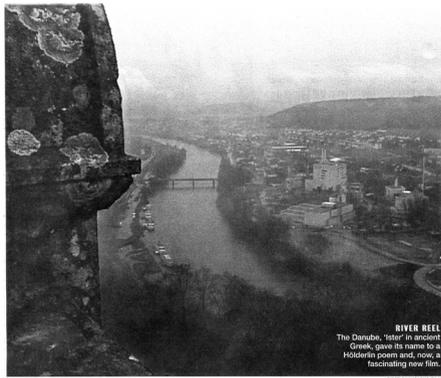
As the filmmakers' itinerary reaches Germany, "The Ister" turns to confront another, more controversial aspect of Heidegger: his embrace of Nazism, and his seeming refusal, even after the war, to acknowledge the magnitude of its evil. His lecture on the Hölderlin poem, after all, took place at the height 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 Hölderlin's poetry; as he writes in "The Ister":

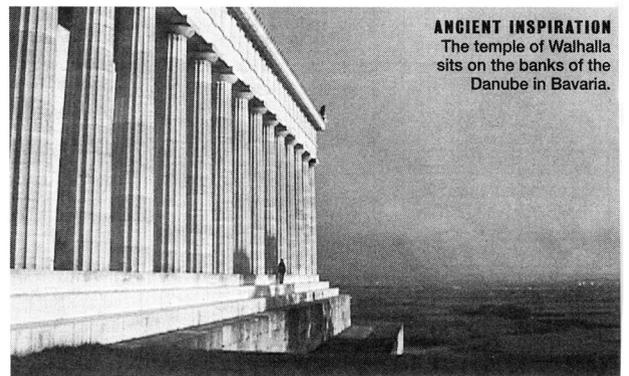
But the rock needs incisions
And the earth needs furrows,
Would be desolate else, unabiding.

"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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RIVER BEEL
The Danube, 'Ister' in ancient Greek, gave its name to a Hölderlin poem and, now, a fascinating new film.



ANCIENT INSPIRATION
The temple of Waihalla sits on the banks of the Danube in Bavaria.

George Robinson (02/11/2005)

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.

senses of cinema

September 2004

Excerpt from “Killing the Gatekeeper: Autonomy, Globality and Reclaiming Australian Cinema”

By Matthew Clayfield

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.” Now, *that's* success. And *The Ister's* a revelation.

MOVIESReviewer's Rating  User Rating Reviewed by [Jamie Russell](#)

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.

July 29, 2004

Flow of rich philosophy

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 went on to write a PhD thesis; Barison 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.

Film

October 6 2004

The Ister (David Barison & Daniel Ross, 2004, AU)

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.

The Observer

film Reviews

The Ister

Philip French
Sunday October 3, 2004
[The Observer](#)

Made by two Australian philosophers-turned-moviemakers, *The Ister* is a stimulating three-hour journey in time, space and the mind. They take us up the Danube from the Black Sea to Germany looking at life, art, politics, history and other things through the prism of a lecture given in 1942 by the Nazi-sympathising intellectual Martin Heidegger on a poem by Friedrich Hölderlin.



October 2004

The Ister

(Docu -- Australia)

A Black Box Sound and Image production. (International Sales: Black Box Sound and Image, Fitzroy, Australia.) Produced, directed, edited by David Barison, Daniel Ross.

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

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. Tyro 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 theatrical 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 Friedrich 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.