

# THE ISTER

A Film by David Barison & Daniel Ross



189 minutes / color / 2004

English, German, French & Romanian with English Subtitles

"An Original undertaking."  
– *Artforum*

"A gripping  
philosophical journey."  
– *Cahiers du Cinéma*

"A revelation!"  
– *Senses of Cinema*

## ICARUS FILMS

32 Court Street, 21st floor / Brooklyn, NY 11201

(718) 488-8900 / f (718) 488-8642

mail@IcarusFilms.com / www.IcarusFilms.com

## Synopsis 1

THE ISTER is a 3000km journey to the heart of Europe, from the mouth of the Danube river on the Black Sea, to its source in the German Black Forest. Hailed by Scott Foundas of *Variety* as "a philosophical feast—at which it is possible to gorge oneself yet leave feeling elated," the film is based on the work of the most influential and controversial philosopher of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger, who in 1933 swore allegiance to the National Socialists. By joining a vast philosophical narrative with an epic voyage along Europe's greatest waterway, THE ISTER invites you to unravel the extraordinary past and future of 'the West.'

## Synopsis 2

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:

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 /s 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.

## Review Excerpts

"A probing, evasive meditation on time, culture and change, images and actions, and the necessity for both."

—*Film Comment*

"Fascinating! Cunningly structured... Breathtaking!"

—*The Jewish Week*

"An expansive journey of ideas about the evolution of Mankind and the development of Western civilization. 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. A philosophical feast — at which it is possible to gorge oneself yet leave feeling elated."

—Scott Foundas, *Variety*

"A layered and rigorous meditation on place and ethics that is strangely affirming."

—*Time Out*

"Amazingly compelling!"

—*San Francisco Bay Guardian*

"With a great poetic sensibility, the directors enable a comprehension of the complexity of the contemporary world."

— *L'Humanité*

"An impressive philosophical exercise and a meditative work of cinematic beauty."

—*BBC*

"Possesses a visual beauty that's rare in the documentary field...  
An impressive cinematic tribute to the river from which it takes its name."

—*Channel 4* (UK)

"A rich, dense and exhilarating series of connections, arguments and ambiguities. [THE ISTER] 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."

—*The Age*

"Fascinating!"

—*The Evening Standard*

"A stimulating three-hour journey in time, space and the mind."

—*The Observer*

## **Awards and Selected Festival Screenings**

*Winner*, Prix GNCR (Groupement National des Cinémas de Recherche),  
2004 Marseille International Documentary Film Festival

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

2005 "Film Comment Selects" Series, Lincoln Center, New York

2005 Lisbon International Documentary Film Festival

2005 DOCNZ, International Documentary Film Festival New Zealand

2005 Summerfest, Miami Art Central

2005 St Paul International Film Festival

2005 It's All True International Documentary Festival (Sao Paolo/Rio de Janeiro)

2005 Symposium on Philosophy and Film, Australian National University

2005 Portland International Film Festival

2005 Mexico City International Contemporary Film Festival

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (January 2005)  
With Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy and Bernard Stiegler

2005 Docpoint Helsinki Documentary Film Festival

2005 Heidegger Symposium, University of Dallas

2005 WaterWays Conference, "Confluence of Art, Science, Policy, & Philosophy," University of North Texas

2004 Rotterdam International Film Festival

2004 Anonimul International Independent Film Festival (Romania)

2004 Brisbane International Film Festival

2004 Melbourne International Film Festival

2004 Sydney International Film Festival

2004 Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema

2004 Marseille International Documentary Festival

2004 Munich Filmfest

## Directors' Statement



Filmmakers David Barison (left) and Daniel Ross.

What initially compelled us to make *THE ISTER* was a passion for Heidegger's thought, and the belief that cinema contains hidden potential for approaching philosophical questioning. *The Ister* is not a presentation or representation of Heidegger's philosophical work, still less is it a work of philosophy itself. To present Heidegger's work cinematically would, as Jacques Derrida has said, probably require an audience prepared to sit for a twenty-hour screening.

What we hope the audience will discover in *THE ISTER* is a film that allows the audience to experience the way in which Heidegger's thought remains alive today. It is alive in Bernard Stiegler's struggle to separate his own thought of man as essentially technical, from Heidegger's questioning concerning technology. It is alive in Jean-Luc Nancy's struggle to ask foundational questions about politics. It is alive in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's passionately ethical wrestling with the implications of Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism. And it is alive in the grand attempt of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg to find ways of making art appropriate to our times.

The discussion presented in *THE ISTER* ranges over a wide array of themes—technology, mortality, politics, war, poetry—but what crystallizes these themes is a concern with time and place. What makes Heidegger's thought open to cinematic approaches is fundamentally this relation to time and place. What the Danube river offers to the filmmaker is something not easily presented in other media. It is not only the flow of water, or the river as a metaphor for life or the cosmos. Nor is it only that along the river there is the opportunity for discovering provocative historical imagery—the ruins of a Greek colony in Romania, Yugoslavian bridges bombed by NATO, a concentration camp built on a quarry, a massive 19th century temple built to mark the "kinship" between Germany and ancient Greece. What cinema offers is the possibility for conveying the way in which the thought of Heidegger, of Hölderlin, of those who speak in the film, exists within a world of time and place, of the Danube and of Europe. That the very possibility for such thought lies in its temporal and geographic conditions is itself a profoundly Heideggerian notion.

It is our hope that *THE ISTER* will convey some of the power of the thought of the 20th century's most powerful thinker. And it is our further hope that it will show a few of the manifold ways that his thought remains alive and is transformed in some of the most remarkable thinkers of the new century.

*David Barison and Daniel Ross*  
*Melbourne, Australia, 2004*

## Key Figures and Concepts

### Martin Heidegger

Born in 1889, Martin Heidegger is the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century. After an apprenticeship with 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. 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 France in 1952, Bernard Stiegler spent five years in prison for armed robbery. During this period of enforced isolation, he became a philosopher. He was released in 1983. In 1994 he published the first volume of his magnum opus, *La technique et le temps* (*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.

## Key Figures continued

### 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. He was a collaborator with Jean-Luc Nancy, the two having written 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 (Heidegger, Art and Politics)*, containing the results of his passionate wrestling with the 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 the Nazi regime 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.

## Credits

### Producers

David Barison and Daniel Ross

### Directors

David Barison and Daniel Ross

### Editor

David Barison

### Camera

David Barison and Daniel Ross

### Sound Design

David Barison and Daniel Ross

### Sound Editor

Luvia Ruzic

### Sound Mixer

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.

### Locations

France, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Yugoslavia, Romania 2000-2003

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