



*Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.* Max Cacopardo.

*The Ister.* David Barison and Daniel Ross.

*The Question.* Henri Alleg.

David Barison, Daniel Ross. *The Ister.* First Run/Icarus Films, 2004.

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Published on H-Ideas (July, 2007)

## Philosophers on Celluloid: Sartre, Beauvoir, Heidegger, and the French Heideggerians

The names of two of the great thinkers of the twentieth-century will be indissolubly intertwined: Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. Despite similar starting points, however, their philosophical and political itineraries departed in radically different directions. Both were critics of the transcendental subject that was the centerpiece of modern Western philosophy beginning with Descartes' famous *cogito ergo sum* and reaching a new apotheosis in Edmund Husserl's phenomenological project. But Sartre's existential critique led him to embrace freedom and responsibility, to reject as 'bad faith' any possibility of an essential authenticity whether in the form of an individual's inherent rights or social position, arguing that nationalist, ethnic or racist politics foreclosed his conception of existential authenticity. Achieving fame under the heel of the Nazi jackboot, he emerged from the war as an activist-witness, an insurgent intellectual who embraced the downtrodden and oppressed in their struggle for recognition and political emancipation. Heidegger, too, longed for the possibility of existential authenticity that industrial modernity with its prefabricated roles seems to foreclose. He came to believe that the National Socialist revolution would sweep away the disingenuous freedoms of liberalism (Americanism) and materialism (communism) and enable a reconnection to the *Volk* and ancient rhythms and traditions that would foster a romanticist sense of individu-

ality coupled with wholeness. In April 1933, he became the Rector of the University of Freiberg amidst the political "restructuring" of education. His infamous *Rektoratsrede* of May 27, 1933 is replete with references to the *Führerprinzip* couched in philosophical language. In early November during his campaign urging support for Hitler's referendum on Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations he proclaimed, "The Führer himself is the present and future German reality and its law." As Karl Löwith argued, a decision for the Führer would demonstrate the authenticity of the Volk. While Heidegger broke with the Nazis in April 1934, pursuing his philosophical reflections until his death, he remained almost silent about the nefarious consequences of his political involvement with the Nazis or their heinous crimes.

These two recent DVDs released by First Run/Icarus Films could not make clearer these differences. *Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir*, originally produced for Canadian television, is a rare treat despite the invariable shortcuts in the translations of the subtitles. The couple had traditionally refused to appear on French television, but they agreed to be interviewed by Madeleine Gobeil in part because she was aided in her questioning by Claude Lanzmann, a confrère of the couple who would later go on to fame with his epic documentary *Shoah*. Lanzmann regularly interjects an apropos

comment or question that forces his interlocutors to go deeper or that brings the uninitiated into the discussion. As such, this is an ideal video for the classroom. The intimate portrait presented of this iconic couple cannot fail to impress: the crispness of Sartre's suits, the habitual puff of smoke as he exhales and extemporizes; Beauvoir's constrained but stylish hairdo and the incisiveness of her machine-gun staccato speech. We are summoned into a meeting of *Les Temps modernes*, the literary and political monthly that became the most important forum of the independent Left in postwar France. We watch over Sartre's shoulder as he observes Arlette Elkaim, his one-time lover and adopted Jewish daughter, play the piano. We are invited into the intimate confines of Sartre's Montparnasse apartment. From his balcony, we see the panoptic view of Paris whose intellectual life he reigned over from 1945 to 1960. We meet Sartre's mother as she ruffles through photographs of the father Sartre never knew or the young Sartre famously captured in *Les Mots* (*Words*), for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize, which the iconoclast promptly refused. Sartre elaborates on why as head of the Russell Tribunal he believed that public intellectuals could make a difference by putting the American colonial endeavor on trial in Vietnam. At the time, he would even argue that the American war on the terror of communism in Vietnam was genocidal. In doing so, Sartre stretched too far, but the carpet-bombing in Cambodia at the end of the conflict by the American military would lead to Pol Pot's auto-genocide there from 1975-1979, making his denunciation prophetic. Vietnam and Cambodia ought to be cautionary tales in the era of Iraq and Darfur. Today genocide has gone unabated partly because Iraq is a screen that does not permit us to see the gravest injustices taking place and partly because European and Chinese oil interests, and the US war on terror mean the Great Powers watch idly as "never again" turns into "again and again."

The recent re-release by Nebraska Press of Henri Alleg's *La question* (*The Question*) with its famous preface by Sartre condemning torture in the French war against the terror of the *Front de Libération nationale* (FLN) also stings the conscience today. Ellen Ray's fine "Foreword" puts it into the context of the present war on terror, while James Le Sueur's excellent "Introduction" reminds us of the circumstances that led to Alleg's banned book, which enumerates his trial by torture. "Torture is senseless violence, born in fear," Sartre railed in the preface. "The purpose of torture is not only to make a person talk, but to make him betray others. The victim must turn himself by his screams and by his submission

into a lower animal....In this way exploitation puts the exploiter at the mercy of his victim, and the dependence itself begets racialism" (pp. xxxix, xl, xli). Post-Abu Ghraib does not America's hegemony seem frail and its victims seem to have the upper hand? Sartre's critique of the interdependence of racism and imperialism, building on the insights of his earlier phenomenology of antisemitic hatred, all indicate why his thought has had a resurgence in the early days of our new millennium when he seemed so *passé* in the twenty years after his death in 1980. It is welcoming to hear Sartre defend himself against the charges brought at the time:

Madeleine Gobeil: It is stylish today to idolize you like a monument from the past. Some see you as an old civil servant of letters, as the last nineteenth-century writer lost in our century [Foucault], or as the last philosopher, someone who has ceased to be relevant ... What do you think of these charges?

"I think they are legitimate," Sartre would surprisingly begin, "and to take them otherwise would be wrong, since I myself got my own start by attacking Mauriac ... Now it's my turn to be a target." But he would go on and say with full confidence that "only the public and posterity can judge my methods." Judging by the magnitude of the major issues that Sartre addressed within his own time with insight and acumen, his oeuvre will remain a fecund site for thinking against the grain for some time to come as the renaissance in Sartre studies makes evident.

As we approach the centenary of Beauvoir's birth in 2008, no doubt her relevance will be feted, as was Sartre's in 2005. In the DVD, it is Beauvoir who takes us through the streets of Paris, showing the viewers where she was born, where she went to school, and the cafes that she and Sartre made famous in the golden age of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. She discusses her memoirs, novels, and the importance of *The Second Sex*, that extraordinary prolegomena to all postwar feminist politics, which drawing on the categories of the existentialist examination of the human condition considered in new ways the feminine condition. Obviously seeking to provoke, one is stunned today when Lanzmann, sardonically smiling, dares to declare, "Several people say that you are not to be taken seriously because you never had a child. That you are mutilated, incomplete, that it disqualifies all of your propositions and your thesis." One cannot but concur with Beauvoir's response that "this is absurd." Her elaboration indicates why her book was a magnum opus. She explains that she was not exploring the ma-

ternal from the perspective of a mother, but as a sociologist, an anthropologist, a philosopher, and a writer. She considered the role of women not only as mothers, but also as prostitutes and workers. “What I have to say has nothing to do with my personal experience,” she demurs. And the criticisms themselves presuppose the key point that Beauvoir sought to expose: that there “exists only one ‘natural’ way to be a woman when there really are thousands....This is a prejudice solely reserved for women. Nobody would accuse a childless man of being incomplete.”

Despite wonderful moments like these, the documentary is hardly a work of art: shots are sometimes shaky and out of focus without intending to be so and there are many frames that might have been left on the cutting floor if there was more time or footage to work with. But the imperfections only accent why this film is such a treasure. Beauvoir ends the film by putting it succinctly:

For many reasons, we always refused to appear on French television, so there exists no footage of us, no document besides our books. We’d like to see films of our favorite writers from the past, so, in a way, we’re doing this out friendship for our readers, for our future readers. Our gift to them. This is a time capsule.

Unearthing this time capsule is exhilarating because the viewer is brought into close contact with these legendary icons and we get a sense of why their fame and aura endures.

The same could not be said for *The Ister*. The film began as a doctoral thesis by Daniel Ross, one of its two Australian debut directors. One critic aptly called it a “DVPhD,” since it is a film that you have to read, and not only the subtitles, as a series of texts run across the screen throughout, peppered by only occasionally compelling visuals. At well over three hours, it is a bloated journey up the “Istros,” the Greek name for the Danube, passing from Croatia, into Romania, Hungary, and Austria, eventually winding its way to the proximity of Heidegger’s Hut in Todtnauberg in the Black Forest in Germany, purportedly one of the Danube’s sources. In 1934, just after he turned down the chair in philosophy in Berlin (the most prestigious in Germany) Heidegger wrote “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?” explaining the allure of Todtnauberg, his mountainous retreat outside of Freiberg:

[M]y whole work is sustained and guided by the world of these mountains and their people ... [A]s soon as I go back up there ... I am simply transported into the work’s own rhythm, and in a fundamental sense I am not

in control of its hidden law. People in the city often wonder whether one gets lonely up in the mountains among the peasants for such long and monotonous periods of time. But it isn’t loneliness, it is solitude....Solitude has the peculiar and original power of not isolating us but projecting our whole existence out in to the vast nearness of the presence [*Wesen*] of all things.

This opposition between the technical wizardry of the urban metropole and the natural landscape of the peasant served as a leitmotif for Heidegger’s later thought and it serves as a key trope as well for *The Ister*.

The pretext for this peregrination up the Danube is that in 1942, Heidegger gave a series of lectures on Friedrich Hölderlin’s poem, “Der Ister.” Hölderlin wrote as if the river flowed backward from the mythopoetic landscape of Greece. *The Ister* depicts itself as an accompaniment and commentary on Heidegger’s lectures. The guides for this journey are three leading French Heideggerians—Bernard Stiegler, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy—and the German filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. What philosopher Jacques Derrida named *différance*—the deferral of meaning through the web of signification—ought to be apparent as the film layers text upon text in a way that the referent itself becomes complicated. This cinematic work has some of the virtues but all of the vices of reading these Heideggerian theorists, whose point for the unversed is often hard to pin down.

Indeed, the film seeks to translate into a cinematic experience what has rightfully enraptured this generation of French Heideggerians, since they are among the most compelling questions of our time: issues of subjectivity, language, historicity, time, origin-ality, memory, technology, myth, place, and European identity. If Sartre’s meteoric rise to popularity in the aftermath of World War II popularized Heideggerian existentialism, then Heidegger’s retort in his “Letter on Humanism,” with its turn towards language seemed to proffer a more radical anti-humanism than Sartre’s, at the same time that Heidegger’s work in the 1940s had begun to focus on technology and the *Destruktion* of the Western metaphysical tradition. The film seeks to explore these concerns for Heidegger and for our French contemporaries who have re-read him to suit the concerns of the global media age with a left-leaning political edge. The only problem with this is that like a fish-bone caught in the throat, Heidegger’s own political, aesthetic, and ethical proclivities have often choked this effort.

In the Prologue to the film, Stiegler riffs on the ori-

gin myth of technology in the West: Prometheus giving fire to man when his brother Epimetheus had provided all the necessities for survival to animals. The first section of the film from the Danube's mouth to Croatia expands upon Siegler's ruminations on technology and time. In the journey through Romania the focus dwells on archaeology and history and the prosthetics that humans develop as part of their memory techniques, as the camera pans the ruins of the Greek colony in Romania. In Vokovar in Croatia, the mythopoetics of tribal nationalism are referenced. In Hungary, we visit the "Statue Park" of discarded Communist monuments. All through the film, laboriously drawn-out shots of the Danube provide the connective threads, alluding to the train-tracks so eerily evoked in Lanzmann's *\_Shoah\_*. We are introduced to the fact that Heidegger was a card-carrying Nazi as Jean-Luc Nancy takes over as the escort through Hungary.

In one of the most interesting segments, Lacoue-Labarthe is the accompanying analyst as the trip winds from Vienna to the Mathausen concentration camp complex, where the steps to the stone quarries were used to torture Jews, communists, and other inmates, even as German industry harnessed these labor camps to building the Reich. With the visual backdrop of the industrial cityscape, as he had in *\_La fiction du politique\_* (translated as *\_Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political\_*), his contribution to the Heidegger controversy that raged in the late 1980s on the relationship between Heidegger's thought and politics, Lacoue-Labarthe comments at length on the "scandalous" equation that Heidegger drew in 1949 in one of his only remarks referencing the genocide of European Jewry:

Agriculture today is a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in 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.

Lacoue-Labarthe unequivocally condemns Heidegger's equation of the Final Solution, the Berlin Blockade, and agro-business, since these three events are "completely incommensurable." But at the same time, he also seeks to explain the power of Heidegger's insight in two ways. First, Heidegger (in Lacoue-Labarthe's redemptive reading) was drawing attention to the "decisive" transformation of technology during World War I, specifically in terms of the fundamental changes "in the rules and law of war." Secondly, Heidegger was highlighting how

technology made possible "the concentration and deportation of populations" and created the possibility of massacres so large that "even the most murderous regimes of old could not have imagined them....The real transformation takes place when it becomes possible to kill as if it were a matter of factory production." In short, Lacoue-Labarthe sought to explore the inextricable logics that connect modernity and the Holocaust through an interpretation of Heidegger's horrific equation. In doing so, he follows Heidegger's deconstruction to its limits, extending it even to Heidegger himself. But the result is to give credit to Heidegger for addressing a set of problems that he utterly failed to confront and in so doing helps to exculpate the philosopher's complicity with Nazism and his utter insufficiency in addressing his past choices.

As the film reaches the source, Syberberg, the director of the controversial five-hour theatrical *\_Hitler, a Film from Germany\_* takes over as guide. Winding nearby King Ludwig I of Bavaria's neo-classical Walhalla temple, built to celebrate the kinship of Germany and ancient Greece, he makes plain what gets obscured through much of the film: that Hölderlin's and Heidegger's desire to uncover an authentic connection between the glories of Greece and Germany that has been smothered by modernity is a phantasm, "a projection, not the real Greece." Unsettling the whole expansive project of the film, he further stipulates, "Rivers don't have that poetic power any more."

And there lies the rub. The thread of the river's winding path and the landscape around it has become repetitive after three hours. In *\_Shoah\_*, for much of the more than nine hours of the film, Lanzmann focused on the landscape of destruction traversed by the trains, seeking to establish a space for a pensive mode of spectatorship and reflection. In refusing to fetishize the iconography of the Holocaust, he supplemented the impossibility of representing the events with the testimony of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. The encounter with these historical actors and how they narrated what they experienced, provoked by his obsessive set of questions—questions which are ours—made this cinematically and emotionally compelling. But this cinematic technique does not work here because there is no referent beyond the layered texts that *\_The Ister\_* wants to interrogate. There is no reservoir of visual images as there is in the case of the Holocaust that the viewer can draw upon to fill the landscape beyond the philosophical guides commenting on Heidegger commenting on Hölderlin. As such, the epilogue appropriately leaves us with Heidegger reading Hölderlin's text. As an ambitious undertak-

ing, *The Ister* either needed to make dramatic cuts and different visual choices or it would be better read as a book, where the interaction with the ideas could unfold more slowly with the possibility of referencing and reflecting that simply does not translate to the cinematic medium very easily.

In these two films, we get a picture of Heidegger and Sartre and what is gripping about both thinkers. Heidegger's thought weaves together a series of elusive ruminations, often in an arcane philosophical vocabulary, on the deepest issues of our era. He explored in a new idiom the fundamental grounds of our being human: our interaction with the environment, the role of technology, and our desire and necessary failure to master the world, others, and our-selves through reason. This is what has

drawn the best philosophical minds in France to his work, even as they have turned the political implications of his thought in a direction long distant from their maître-à-penser. No one went further in this direction than Sartre, who thought against the closures of the Western metaphysical tradition by embracing the struggles of the Third World, by exposing racism and antisemitism as inauthentic responses to modernity, by insisting that torture is a by-product of the contradictions built into the bourgeois world order, and by thinking alongside Beauvoir, whose feminism began the process of deconstructing the gender binaries that underpin the most basic relation to our being humans—the culturally constructed oppositions we associate with 'man' and 'woman'. Each make evident why we have not yet finished with existentialism even after postmodernism.

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**Citation:** Jonathan Judaken. Review of , *Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir* and , *The Ister* and , *The Question* and Barison, David; Ross, Daniel, *The Ister*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15483>

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