'Ontological Narratives: ways of being in film'

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Introduction

Ontological Narratives is a research project that explores philosophy through filmmaking practice. The project is concerned to extend and complicate notions of practice as research, through the production of a group of films which both represent and interrogate theoretical issues raised by specific philosophical texts. It aims to both pursue specific research themes — questions concerning ontology and its relation to film narrative — and to question what we mean, and might mean, when we talk of practice as research. The project has forged interdisciplinary connections between film and philosophy through creative practice, a position which is largely absent from much philosophical discourse on film. It also works through a feminist standpoint, one which interrogates philosophy ontologically and epistemologically.

In terms of philosophical content, the films from *Ontological Narratives* contain subject matter derived from readings of philosophers that are transformed and interrogated via fictional stories. These stories centre on or pertain to the question of being / being human. This focus on the 'most universal and emptiest of concepts' responds to Heidegger's challenge set forth in Being and Time: 'the indefinability of Being does not eliminate the question of its meaning: it demands that we look the question in the face' (1990: 23). In other words we must find a way to adequately formulate the question. Since being cannot be considered as an entity, traditional logic cannot be applied (Heidegger, 1990). Heidegger thus lays the ground for hermeneutics and for deconstruction. He is questioning the supremacy of logos and the value of reason, opening the possibility for a non-textual, material basis for knowing. Phenomena must be interpreted through handling material and through processes in the world; in the case of Ontological Narratives, these comprise the textual form (the philosophical text) and the material medium (film, video, fiction, narrative). My practice as research then, is exploring the question of being alongside the form in which that question can be asked (or has been asked). In the films, the philosophical subject matter (for example, eiodos, will, trace, deconstruction) is transformed through a phenomenological inquiry by the human agent(s) that are characters in the story unfolding. The films consider the question of being for the characters involved who are treated as entities in a Heideggerian sense.[1] This phenomenological enquiry is extended to the treatment or handling of film (process and outcome) as an entity

that can be used (in the sense of 'readiness to hand' (Heidegger, 1990)), which has possibilities appropriate to itself (and only to itself) and which makes apparent the 'hiddenness' involved in the 'ontological difference' between 'being' and 'beings'.

The project has resulted in three fiction films, a monograph and two journal articles, alongside video documentation, research sketches and a personal journal. The fiction films produced sit between the genres of drama, documentary, art cinema, experimental and essay film. The research process for *Ontological Narratives* was an organic one that responded through iterative cycles to developments and outcomes within the sub-projects and the films resulting. For this reason the research questions developed through making the films, building upon previous iterations. In this way knowledge generation is derived from process and outcome, evident in the artefacts created and also expressible through associated commentary. *Ontological Narratives* and the films produced have been disseminated through public screenings, conference presentations, exhibitions and online distribution. The project has been awarded two Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grants and a prize from the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS). The project has been contextualised within debates on practice as research through my roles as Chair of Practice of the national subject association MeCCSA (Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association) and as Principal Investigator on the AHRC funded Filmmaking Research Network.

In this article, I will discuss my methods and the outputs and how they may contribute to the field of practice research and to philosophy. Production stills and video extracts feature and the full films are available to view at the end of the article.

Studio shooting 'A mind's eye' where an enclosed room of two way mirrors symbolised a 'world of forms'.

Background and Methods

I became interested in philosophy through an evening course. I was working in the film and television sector as a producer and camera assistant, and making my own short documentaries and video art pieces. These were rooted in issues of family, relationships and identity, and were often cynical, reflexive films about filmmaking. I had become disillusioned with the professional industry's regimented system of production founded on gender and class bias, and the restrictive, censorial approach to 'intellectual' content. In 2002 I enrolled on a Masters in Art and Media Practice at the University of Westminster, producing two films: *Thrownness* (2003) and *Mrs De Winter's Dualism Dilemma* (2003).

These works were the beginnings of a transition from the personal to the philosophical and from documentary to fiction. The MA degree established academia as a site for creative production for me, which could provide intellectual support and practical resources to further my own form of counter cinema. In adopting fiction/narrative as a mode, I was distinguishing my approach from other theoretically informed practices operating in the spaces between academy and art/film practice. The legacy of structuralist materialist film in the UK by makers and theorists such as LeGrice, Wollen, Mulvey, Gidal and O'Pray had provided a model for how theory might inform practice, but it subjugated philosophy (theory) in order to inform the production of avant-garde practice. The results lacked an emotional sphere, and, as filmmaker Michelle Citron notes, 'perpetuated one of the dichotomies that underlies Positivism – the higher world of the mind (the intellect) over the baser world of the body (the emotions)' (1988; 52). This was acknowledged by Peter Wollen who argued that much avant-garde work had reached 'an ever narrowing preoccupation with pure film, with film "about" film, a dissolution of signification into object hood and tautology' (1975/2004: 131). Similarly, feminists emphasised that the avant-garde had to do more than just confront form: '...feminism is bound to its politics; its experimentation cannot exclude work on content' (Mulvey, 1979: 9). My task then was twofold. Firstly to work with content far removed from the endorsements of broadcasters, the film council or commercial companies to demonstrate the ingrained ideologies at work in content production, and secondly to do so using the same tools that mainstream film production employs: stories, characters, mise-en-scène, industrial modes of production. The results would show what the academy could offer in terms of practice as research and also as a site for independent, creative production. The films, by using narrative, would 'hook' audiences into content that might 'illuminate as well as entertain' (Citron, 1988: 53).

The processes by which I undertake my practice as research are shaped by the demands of each project. Generally I start with a close reading of a source text by a philosopher and audio-visual research inspired by this reading. I look for visual cues within the text and respond through creative writing. I keep a journal detailing the problems or issues arising and how these relate to my history and experience of the world. These observations become woven into the unfolding research as a soundtrack that

plays under the research. This embodied, subjective approach uses what Donna Haraway calls 'lived experiences' and 'situated knowledge' in meaning making (1988). I produce video sketches, script drafts and I undertake interviews. I draw on secondary sources, but avoid adhering to existing, legitimised interpretations and seek out marginal voices. My research questions arise out of all of this and combine questions of philosophical meaning and interpretation with questions of narrative and narration. These develop and change in response to the production process; I write scripts, cast and direct actors, raise finance, work in studio and on location, employ large professional crews, contract post-production facilities and screen in cinema and gallery spaces. The editing is the locus of the research, absorbing a huge amount of time. It is during this stage, in the handling of the gathered material, that the tacit knowledge generated from the research process surfaces to contest and elaborate that material. As a result new questions arise, the script is re-written, extra sequences may be shot and the film is recut accordingly; a new film emerges, different from the intended film.

A variety of the methods used for 'Love in the Post'.

A praxical approach[2] – Doing Philosophy

In handling philosophy as a filmmaker working inside the academy, I face a number of distinct problems. First, there is a limited field of films explicitly about philosophy; second, using film to adapt and translate a philosophical text presents a set of specific issues; and third, there is the question of how a praxical approach to 'doing' philosophy can be incorporated meaningfully into philosophy.

Precedents

The proposition that film can engender philosophical discourse explicitly is what film philosophers seek to claim. There is already a lengthy history of theoretical analysis of film, which broadly probes film's ontology and epistemology through philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, feminist studies, literary theory and semiotics. Theory is employed for thinking about film, with the core of the enquiry residing in film itself as a source of representational meaning. Film philosophy is different; it has sought to distance and distinguish itself from film theory. Some reasons are pragmatic: film philosophy is undertaken by academics in philosophy departments (of which there are fewer and fewer) or those with a philosophy background who are employed in media or film departments. To this extent, film philosophy is an attempt to inject contemporaneity into philosophy. Ideologically, film philosophy wishes to establish itself as a serious branch of philosophy and to insist it is 'still' philosophy: 'Truly philosophical film thinks seriously and systematically about philosophical arguments and issues' (Goodenough, 2005: 20). There is a tension in film philosophy for the analytic philosophers whose continental counterparts may have, on the whole, got to film before them. These politics are relevant because certain philosophers (and certain filmmakers) may have been marginalised and disregarded.

In film philosophy there is disagreement about film's function for philosophy: a form of illustration or as itself interpretive? Films can illustrate or test out philosophical concepts or problems and can also interpret philosophical ideas, thus expanding thought about those ideas. In both cases, the role of film is more or less illustrative. That a film's nature and role can be understood, conquered and dismissed is the gesture of philosophy. It confines itself to an end and will exclude anomalies that disrupt the journey to the destination of understanding. This might include information about the filmmaker's intention, practice or process, some of which appear to be avoided; perhaps they are too messy, too fleshy, too contingent for serious probing. Such information may surface bodies (and specifically female bodies in my case) and as Christine Battersby has argued, the dominant model of the human in western modernity is disembodied" 'a 'spirit', 'soul', 'consciousness' or *cogito*' whose 'personhood' is bound up with rationality and soul, rather than with flesh (Battersby, 1998: 10). Scholarly work on film and phenomenology offers acknowledgement of bodies and subjectivity. Sobchack (1992) and Frampton (2006) posit a film's subjectivity as being inscribed with the creator's experience, but also argue that the filmgoer's experience is another kind of thinking that emerges.

Filmmakers have been largely hesitant to argue for the prioritisation of filmic discourse as philosophy itself, over presenting philosophical ideas or persons. In mainstream media, philosophy as a topic has had relatively limited treatment. In the UK there have been a number of television series which focus on biographic details as a means to understand or as entry point to the philosopher's oeuvre.[3] Much drama also centres on personalising philosophy and thus lessening its intellectual threat. There are also documentaries and dramas featuring real philosophers as themselves and others featuring representations of those philosophers.[4] In both types of film, the philosopher becomes a star, and their philosophy is subordinated to that status. We are presented with cool, ironic, tech-savvy versions of Plato's philosopher kings. Many of these mainstream films illustrate philosophy, approaching it didactically, rather than using film as a medium for the production or interrogation of knowledge itself.

There are filmmakers who use film as a philosophical tool in explicit ways. Terrence Malick's films border on abstract, experimental meditations on beingness, and he has the added credentials of having studied and translated Heidegger. Ken McMullen uses characters from philosophy, and Jean-Luc Godard produces 'philosophy through the cinema and of the cinema' (Rascaroli, 2009: 99). Godard is the most well known of all for exploring what philosophy provides him with: theory and quotation. He plays with philosophy in dialogue, graphics and voice-over, acknowledging this 'taste for quotation' (Milne,1962: 173). The films of Laura Mulvey, as practice-based research that uses fiction to interrogate philosophy from a feminist standpoint, are relevant to my practice. Other related practice as research includes Phillip Warnell's collaborations with Jean Luc Nancy, feature film *The Ister* (Ross & Barison, 2007) and *Nietzsche in Paris* (Burgin, 2000). These are very different films to mine, but have been produced in academic contexts.

In 'Love in the Post', Theo Marks is a Professor of Philosophy at the fictional University of Wessex where there is a merger between the philosophy and media department.

Adaptation

Issues in adapting and translating a text are dealt with extensively in adaptation studies which focuses on the transformation of literary texts into plays or films (see McFarlane, Andrew, Wheelan). Adapting philosophy as fiction may be antithetical to philosophy's project, which by and large makes claims for truth. Philosophers such as Nietzsche and Sartre wrote fiction and Cixous and Derrida have experimented at the borders of fiction, poetry and philosophy, producing innovative and unusual interventions into this space. By treating philosophy as fiction, there is space for interpretation that moves away from canonised or authorised accounts as it propels the content into a different network of meanings. I have been careful to avoid claiming my films as adaptations of philosophy. This is not because of copyright issues (as may have been the case for the filmmaker in Love in the Post), but because film adaptations, regardless of what source text they use, are inevitably scrutinised for their textual lack. My approach to this problem has been to find audio-visual form for the text that replicates my experience of reading the text (a phenomenological approach), alongside mobilising its philosophical content. Bound to such reading is the facticity of my gender and background and a position bordering disciplines (philosophy, film) and contexts (academia, art).

Incorporation

How can a praxical approach be incorporated into philosophy? There is a tension between the open-endedness of practice and philosophy's totalising structures and logo centrism. A praxical approach to philosophy is a radical intervention that requires a re-configuration of philosophy's self-identity. Plato tells us what should be done but not how to do it: 'we philosophers do not take as our point of departure words, but things' (Sedley, 2003: 38). What is the thing of philosophy? What is its project? To seek truth? To establish or reiterate a thesis? Can philosophy be more than discourse? For Michèle Le Dœuff '..philosophy is just the formal idea that discourse must involve exclusion or discipline, that admissible modes of thought cannot be undefined' (Le Doeuff, 1977: 7). *Ontological Narratives* has a parallel interest in what is crudely the content of philosophy alongside its epistemological status as a discourse developed through a specific genealogy that must be interpreted. It is a move to attend to history which Heidegger reminds us of (Lewis & Staehler, 2010: 68). Broadly I am asking 'What is philosophy?' (what are its ideas, concepts and practices?) and 'Who is philosophy?' (who is legitimate and authorised to speak?) I also ask, though somewhat inadvertently, 'Who am I to ask these questions of philosophy?'

Philosophy has historically been suspicious of creative practitioners. Plato opposed the poets though he wrote poetically and with imagination (Critias is arguably the first work of science fiction and The Timaeus is a dreamlike treatise on the creation of the universe). Philosophy has addressed itself to specific forms of art: Plato on poetry (1951), Aristotle on tragedy (1996), Kant on landscape gardens (1914), Hegel on painting (1886), Baudrillard on Disneyland (1983), Barthes on photography (1982), Zizek on film (2012). The artistic artefacts may offer philosophy concrete illustrations of moral problems. There

is less emphasis on the process of making as something to be investigated philosophically or which may be philosophising itself in another form. There are also restrictions on who is permitted to philosophise: only the few and the learned. Women have been confined to roles as muse, fillers of philosophy's lack or to designated themes (Le Doeuff, 1977). In choosing philosophy I have catapulted myself, as woman, as an Australian and as a creative practitioner, into a discipline which by all accounts I have no academic or personal qualifications to enter. Yet perhaps this is precisely what philosophy needs: to be colonised by foreigners, mined and farmed to produce stuff. My first research question focused on the stuff: 'How can philosophical concepts be translated into aesthetic products?' What could be produced from philosophy besides more philosophy? How could it be used imaginatively? If philosophy is to survive it must do something, exist inside of other things, as part of those things and not as cause or effect. The first project of *Ontological Narratives* set out to explore this problem.

Ontological Narratives I – A mind's eye

Plato's somatic and elemental essences.

Ontological Narratives I was funded through grants from the AHRC, University of Bedfordshire, Australia Council and Arts Council England, and was produced by production company Heraclitus Pictures. The major output was the short film *A mind's eye* (2009, 35mm, 13') alongside video documentation, journal articles and a book chapter. The project aimed to mobilise Plato's eidos using the creative possibilities offered by film. The starting question was 'How can philosophical concepts be translated into aesthetic products?'

The film features images from nature: water, fire, earth and plant, a field of wheat, a horse, a baby and a man. In the field Stanley speaks to another man, Stanley Too, about Plato's ideas. Their dialogue is intercut between the physical world, the world of their thoughts and a world of mirrors. The film ends with a montage of these worlds, and a voice-over from Plato. The final image reveals the camera recording itself via a two way mirror.

Plato believed knowledge was a matter of recollecting what one's soul already knows but has forgotten.

Philosopher kings are capable of this because only they can travel between the world of forms and the world of appearances, where copies of the forms exist. The movement between an eternal world and a copy sets the stage for *A mind's eye*. It establishes an interest in philosophy as an epistemology for it is Plato who founds the academy, based on the master-student relation and its doctrine of superior intellect and transcendence.

For *A mind's eye*, I concentrated on The Timaeus, in which Plato speculates on the nature of the universe, its properties, elements and on spiritual aspects. He develops his notions of forms and copies and introduces the maker or master craftsman and 'soul stuff' (Lee, 1965). He debates whether the world came into being or always existed: '..we must distinguish that which always is and never becomes from that which is always becoming but never is' (Lee, 1965: 40). Plato defines elemental essences as fire, water, wind and earth, and somatic essences as animals, plants and human kind. There are 'heavenly bodies in motion' and the proclamation of the sphere or circle as a perfect form (1965). The text's character, with its mix of poetry, dialogue, speculation and radical fabulations, provided impetus for an experimental film treatment through tableaus, montage, story and dialogue. For example Plato's perfect form became a circular track around the elemental and somatic essences (fire, plant, horse, baby).

A mind's eye_Plato's theory of forms (1')
from Heraclitus Pictures

*The two Stanleys discuss Plato's Theory of Forms (Extract: 1').*

Plato stages his arguments as dialogue with peers and occasionally lesser mortals such as the slave boy in The Meno (Guthrie, 1956). A method to translate Plato's dialogues would be to use extracts as spoken dialogue, elaborated through performance and sound, thus illustrating the text visually. I preferred to find non-verbal means to perform the text and be dialogic in this performance. For example, to address the gendered and somewhat narcissistic nature of Plato's writing I used the metaphor of a mirror in which a man, Stanley, asks questions of himself. As the dialogue progresses, the mirror reflects not one man, but two different men: the twins Oliver and James Phelps who discuss Plato's theory of forms and incorporate 'The Third Man argument', a refutation developed by Aristotle.[5] Through a playful delivery this is rendered comprehensible by the image of twins speaking to each other as if they were the one man, though they are two. The third man is the audience's image of Stanley in her own mind. Complicating the exchange is the presence of the film: as narrative frame (a mirror or picture of the world), as mechanical operation (the camera) and as performance ('I am playing Stanley' says Stanley). The frame was a method to perform the content and what it contains, altering it through repetition and iteration.

A secondary text was Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed* (1971). This book is also dense and at times dialogic, and Cavell has a similar project to Plato, albeit a different focus: to understand the 'nature' of film. Cavell reflects that there is always 'a camera left out of the picture: the one working now' (1971: 127). The camera's presence must therefore be not only acknowledged within the world it creates, but it must be recognised that it is also outside its world. The camera sees its world with a particular mood (echoes of Heidegger) and this acknowledgement has to be more than just the projection itself, or effected by tipping one's hat to the camera (as Stanley Too does), or by the camera taking a picture of itself in the mirror (end of film).

By adopting, parodying and interrogating philosophical dialogue in *A mind's eye*, I was challenging what feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti calls 'the teleologically ordained style of argumentation' and its '… repetition and dutifulness to a canonical tradition that enforces the sanctimonious sacredness of certain texts' (2012: 29). Cavell's manner of writing became incorporated into the script and dialogue of Stanley and Stanley Too. Cavell, like Plato, was instrumental in establishing the beginnings of a body of knowledge, that is of a philosophical interrogation of film's ontology. He was in that sense a 'legitimate heir', having first been a philosopher and the right gender, race and class.

Stanley as the copy and Stanley Too as the essence (the twins Oliver and James Phelps) parallel Plato's *eidos*. Their combined image alludes to a shared essentialness, out of which the two are comprised (Stanley-ness). Their race and gender are receptacles which hold this essentialism. Their infinite reflections receding into the darkness symbolise the impossibility of grasping what may lie beyond the senses and the intellect, but which may never have existed at all. As Derrida suggests, 'the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely' (1978: 280). There is no essential nature, no absolute meaning, no destination. There is only destining and willing. These are

symbolised by the appearance of the camera reflected in the two way mirror, which places Stanley and the camera in parallel time, until the former disappears and the camera is left filming itself. The camera is a phenomenological embodiment of beingness, bringing forth materiality, bodies, presence, and in materialising its own artifice, ends the film. The production design, sound and editing, along with the camera, elaborate and complicate Plato's eidos. An early iteration of Stanley was written as Heidegger's 'Dasein' who visits the world of appearances (Heidegger, 1990). 'Dasein', the beingness of being, would be the camera's eye and its way of seeing the world.
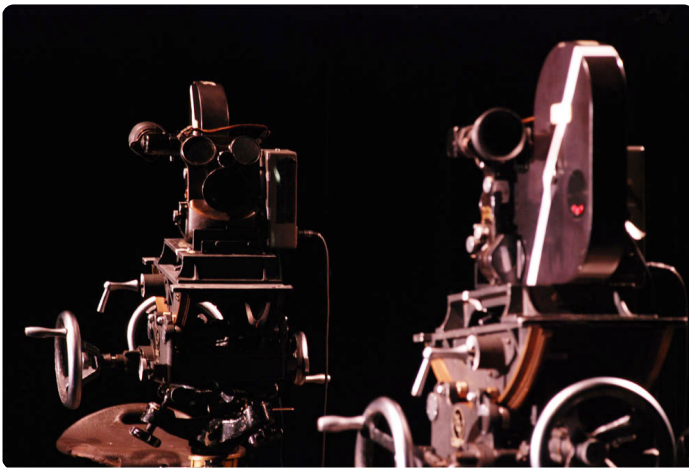
The camera filming 'itself' / Stanley and Stanley Too.

This then posited that the camera, in viewing the world, is the beingness of that world, in other words the essence of a film is what the camera sees (and hears). *A mind's eye* retains this impossible possibility when, for example, the camera pans away from the dialogue between the two Stanleys to seemingly look at the view of the field and clouds. This is a jolt in the viewing experience, a production faux pas, an inauthentic camera movement unmotivated by plot, character or style (Rabiger, 2008). It may be evidence the camera is an invisible self, but that only shifts the emphasis and may be saying too much of a small action (Arnheim, 2004). It is precisely in its mistake-like nature, its untruthfulness and awkwardness that the camera exhibits its own beingness, bringing forth the hiddenness of the world it inhabits. It breaks this world, disrupting narrative cohesion and reminding us that the camera, and in consequence, the film, is in a world, both making and inhabiting, and in doing so has phenomenological capacities. It is experiencing its world. For Daniel Frampton such capacities must be expressed in film-specific-phenomenological terms: 'a film mind', 'film being' and 'film neo-minds' (2006: 23). His vocabulary attempts to reframe film as a constituting consciousness; film body and film image should be seen as one and the same, not separate as a typical phenomenological approach would suggest (2006: 43). Frampton as filmmaker and theorist attempts to bring forth tacit dimensions to the consideration

of film as philosophy.

A mind's eye shows how abstract philosophical concepts can be mobilised into an aesthetic product. In a review for *Screenworks*, John Adams says that the film's use of varied audio-visual strategies 'engages with and interrogates ways in which the cinematic elements are held as subjects of reflexive analysis' (2012). As the first of the *Ontological Narrative* series, the film was a distinct contribution to practice as research and to film philosophy debates, as noted by Iain Grant: 'The approach here adopted is greatly more intelligent and greatly more productive. Rather than merely illustrating this or that concept, the film engages problems of ontology at the levels of its own medium; of the representations of which this medium is capable; and of the representations of which other media (nature and mind) are capable' (2012). The film laid the ground for the next project, which focused explicitly on the role of narrative in film.

Ontological Narratives II- *DO NOT READ THIS*

Ontological Narratives II was funded through grants from the University of Bedfordshire and was produced by Heraclitus Pictures. The result was a medium length film, *DO NOT READ THIS* (2012, HDV, 29'). This project develops film as *willing* (Schopenhauer), and *introduces trace and deconstruction* (Derrida). The narrative structure is influenced by Jorge Luis Borges' method of narrative frames. The focused use of narrative is a development from the previous, more experimental rendering of *A mind's eye*. The research question was 'What role can narrative play in developing a coherent vision of a philosophical concept?'

The film is of Julia, a young woman dealing with the aftermath of the sudden death of her sister Thea, a writer. In the house they shared, she is haunted by her sister's absence and is locked in a series of repetitive actions. Her mourning is interrupted by Thea's publisher searching for an unfinished manuscript. As the story progresses, this manuscript emerges as dictating the unfolding story and revealing Julia as a character written by Thea.

Mysterious parcels are sent and received / Robert tries to retrieve from Julia the missing manuscript.

Schopenhauer as the psychologist of the will, is considered by Thomas Mann as the father of all modern psychology (1939: 21). Mann defines Schopenhauer's will as 'something independent of knowledge… a fundamental, uncausated, utterly unmotivated impulse' (1939: 6). Will as an invisible force behind everything in the world, can be mobilised in a film by a character's journey through a story. It can also be that we as an audience, participate in a character's 'will to live' through the narrative cues we have become accustomed to understand. The character, actor, author, director, crew and viewer will the world of the film as idea. We are willing a representation. Stanley, in *A mind's eye*, willed images from his mind's eye into the noumenal sphere, but in *DO NOT READ THIS*, the 'I' of the willing is complicated by a narrative that plays with its own authority and structure. The method of using a narrative frame, as Borges does, sets up a question of time and narration. Borges plays with time by always referring to a past past in the present. He succeeds in eliminating the linear relation between these so that present is past and past is present. In *DO NOT READ THIS*, the present unfolds as a flashback being written. The mise-en-abyme within it is not a film inside a film, but a story inside a story inside a film. There is a play with writing as a bodily or mechanical act that happens in the present (pens, typewriters) and writing as a recording that happens in the past (document, images, film). Both processes trigger reading and the reading is interrupted by the writing in action (the script, the images being recorded, the performance taking place). This interruption is a form of 'destinerance' (Derrida, 1980). Derrida develops destinerance (or destinerrancy), out of Heidegger's logic of sending, of projecting a meaning, of a destiny, an arrival point known ahead of time. A film as a temporal unfolding destines towards its end, which may be a narrative resolution or the end of its allotted time. Destinerance is 'where destining doesn't resolve quite as destiny because of an element of errancy which affects or afflicts it' (Bennington 2014: 132). *DO NOT READ THIS* disrupts the teleological determination inherent in the structure of fictional narrative – as a destination known in advance, by undoing its destining through an interrogation of the aesthetic and political structures of narrative. Even if there is a 'good arrival point', that is, its destiny fulfilled,

this is haunted by the possibility of its failure (Bennington, 2014). In layering, re-layering and delayering visual and aural elements and rebuilding them in alternative ways, the traces of those things that were remain in what they become. Through performance, casting and location choices, issues of gender, race, sexuality, disability, culture and class are brought to the surface. This approach is deconstructive because it looks for what is inside the film, always already, to be uncovered, brought to light, re-read.
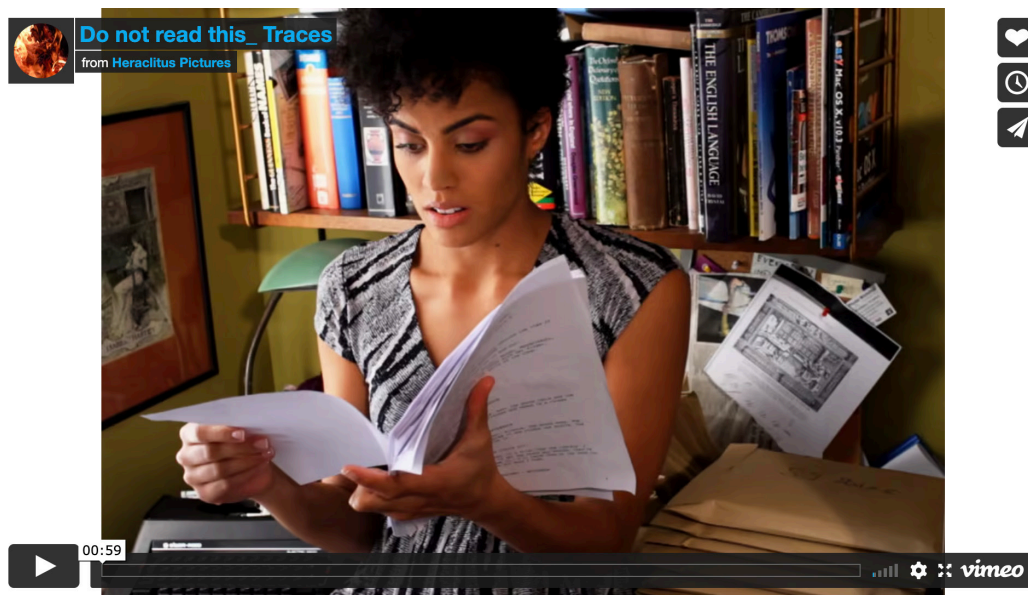
Traces of traces (Extract 1').

DO NOT READ THIS is a ghost story, but who is haunting whom? The author Thea has died and left behind an unfinished manuscript. Thea's sister Julia is in mourning, seeing and hearing her in the house they shared. Julia's grief prevents her from speaking: the mixed race woman has no voice. She is the sister of a white woman. Is that narratively plausible? We live in a society made up of varied family units though we may not see them on our screens. It could be an in memoriam to lesbians forced to live under veiled circumstances or sisters may simply refer to two women who have solidarity with each other. The casting is purposefully oppositional, intending to surface what appear as anomalies. This is extended by performance and character development. Julia symbolises a character, but is retarded in her development as one, by her *thrownness* (Heidegger, 1990). She has been thrown into being and is existing towards her birth and projecting towards her death. Her mood comes 'neither from 'outside' nor from 'inside', but arises out of Being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1990: 176). Julia is existing in a film and story world being written by her sister. Her performance doesn't cue the empathetic requirements for character identification in mainstream cinema. There is limited access to her psychological motivations or individual personality; rather our attention is drawn outwards to the world she finds herself in, instead of inwards towards what Tom Gunning calls 'the character based situations essential to classical narra-

tive' (1986: 59). Her performance is sometimes wooden and her 'funny eye' makes us uncertain where she is looking: at us, at the camera or beyond the camera at the author? The actress who is blind in one eye, was cast because of her race and her disability, which solicits attention back to corporality. Such an intended character is also a feminist response to patriarchal narrative structures where character is and has to be the dominant element of the text and the focus of its truth (Martin, 1977: 38). Instead the film points, slowly and with more urgency, to character (in this case Julia), as a product of structures and mechanisms at work in the film. In this way Julia is a ghost of her own character; that she does not exist is enclosed in her existing. Derrida rejects the 'metaphysics of presence' and directs our attention to absence. *DO NOT READ THIS* allows absence to surface, as ghostly presence arising from the experience of mourning, and as authorial presence arising from the mise-en-abyme. The narrative frame is complicated by a factual intervention from the filmmaker: the author of the story is Thea, and the author of Thea is Joanna, who is the actor playing Thea in the film. *DO NOT READ THIS* explores what role fictional narrative can play in developing a vision for philosophy. In the next project, I interrogate philosophy more profoundly using multiple narratives and registers, to create a distinct vision of philosophy.
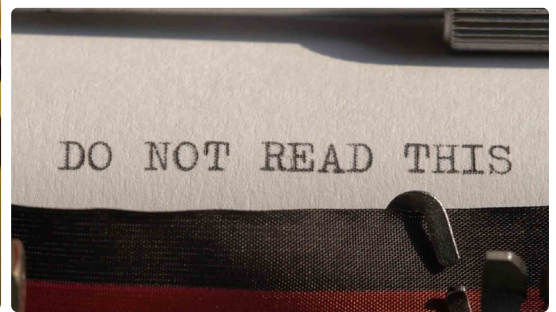
Julia is haunted by visions of Thea.

Ontological Narratives III: *Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida*

Ontological Narratives III was funded through grants from the AHRC, University of Bedfordshire, Kingston University and University of Sussex, and was produced by Heraclitus Pictures. It is the longest and most extensive of the projects, resulting in a feature film Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida (2014, HDV, 80'), [five short films](), a [book]() and two [journal articles](). It has been [screened]() internationally in cinemas and gallery spaces, is in over 100 academic collections, is distributed by [Kanopy]() and been presented at over 50 conferences and events. In 2015 the film won '[Best practice portfolio]()' from the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS), who called it a 'highly original, novel and impactful piece of (screen) work' (Atkinson, 2016). For *Ontological Narratives III*, Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card* (1980) is a point of departure for a consideration of filmmaking and epistemology. The film resulting is a hybrid drama documentary, co-written with Derrida scholar [Professor Martin McQuillan](). It employs the use of three registers: the documentary interview as commentary about the book, a narrative drama which reimagines the fiction of *The Post Card* in contemporary times, and a fictionalised autobiographical journey of the filmmaker in producing a film based on *The Post Card*. The research question for the project was: 'If film's encounter with philosophy is to be more than illustration, how can we perform the production of knowledge/philosophy within film itself?'

Love in the Post is about Theo Marks, a scholar of literature who discovers love letters to his wife Sophie and sets out to find who sent them. Sophie is pregnant and visits a psychoanalyst, where her sessions reveal the affair may be on-going. She reads extracts from *The Post Card* in a salon d'art to an audience that includes Joanna, who is producing a film about *The Post Card*. Joanna interviews scholars about the book including Theo, and struggles to complete her film. She receives mysterious letters that she refuses to open. Theo pursues the sender of the love letters to his wife, visiting a graphologist and planting an audio bug in the psychoanalyst's office, where he hears Sophie's secrets. He travels to Oxford to deliver a lecture on *The Post Card*, on fidelity and betrayal. Joanna, at the wrap party for her film, receives another mysterious letter, which this time she opens. Theo, on the way home from Oxford, burns the letters and is reunited with Sophie. Joanna finishes her film.

Derrida's *The Post Card* is divided into two sections: the first, 'Envois', is a series of love letters, and the second is a collection of essays on psychoanalysis. 'Envois' plays on the conventions of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, such as Rousseau's *Julie* (1761) and Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782), but it also does other things. It has long passages where the narrator meditates on the history of the postal system, on philosophy as genealogy – prompted by a postcard he finds at the Bodleian Library, and on psycho-analysis as he prepares a lecture, the 'Legs of Freud'. The book describes real people in episodes that happened and contains true but hidden facts.

The story tells of a love affair, of infidelity in marriage, and of an illegitimate child. Derrida was married for fifty years to Marguerite Derrida, a psychoanalyst with whom he had two sons. He also had a child with philosopher Sylvia Agazinski, wife of former prime minister Lionel Jospin. Derrida never acknowledged this son, Daniel, or this affair, and yet this book can be read as a public avowal of this relationship, however uncomfortable the world of Derrida scholars may be with that. What we have, then, is a 'living essay' on Derrida's reading of Lacan's seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' (1955) which in turn was based on the short story of the same name by Edgar Allan Poe. In the short story, the missing letter is hidden in plain sight, the secret can be seen by all and yet remains unseen. In this way, for those who knew about Derrida's affair, the 'Envois' sends them a private message. There is a craziness about the love story within the 'Envois', in that a relationship which was so private and so secret is propelled into the public realm, albeit in a fictionalised way. It is also a 'shocking' book, because somebody who has spent their life writing philosophical texts of the most rigorous type puts out this fictional work about a love affair (McQuillan, 2012).

The book then functions as one long post card. Derrida was interested in post cards, because what appears to be a private correspondence, sent from one person to another, has to pass through a network which exposes it to the view of others, for example the postman. The message, therefore, can be read and understood by someone for whom it was not intended. This reading prompts new possibilities for the message, new readings unfettered by the intentions of the sender. This postal principle, as Derrida calls it, parallels deconstruction. 'Envois' deconstructs its own physicality – there are gaps in text, sentences begin but do not finish, paragraphs start mid-sentence. This is according to the narrator, because parts of the letters were burnt, erased, left out, reflecting that communication is only ever partial, meaning can never arrive at its destination. Derrida was testing the limits of the medium of the book, of literature, of philosophy and of psychoanalysis. Similarly, *Love in the Post* tests the limits of film, literature, philosophy and practice as research. Through the stories of Sophie, Joanna and Theo the film performs Derrida's text, interrogating the book's themes through phenomenological enquiry mobilised by the characters. In doing so it develops a distinct and new vision of the text and of film as philosophy, as argued by Sarah Dillon in _Deconstruction, Feminism, Film_ (2018): '*Love in the Post* replaces the text-based idea of the countersignature with a film-based idea of the material support and a spatial understanding of philosophy as behind film, as film as that through which we can access philosophy. In a further, feminist, gesture, it also cinematically reimagines Derrida's philosophic understanding of inheritance as faithful betrayal, replacing this conceit with that of "reproduction"' (2018: 32). I will reflect on two of the characters, Theo and Joanna and how they mobilise Derrida's ideas and some of my own in relation to filmmaking. (I also did this for Sophie through a video essay, 'Materialising the Other: Pregnancy and Deconstruction'.)

Joanna, Theo and Sophie's lives interact in an unexpected ways.

Fidelity and Betrayal: Joanna Callaghan

Perhaps Derrida was waiting for a non-disciple like filmmaker Joanna to betray him in the 'best possible way'. Created to bring forth the materiality of filmmaking, Joanna is director, producer and later editor, tirelessly pursuing the impossible, 'a film that makes you think'. We witness her navigate the practical, ethical and intellectual problems, best typified by the discussions with Helen the editor, for whom the film 'makes no sense'. Joanna's documentary struggles with the weight of the scholarly interviews, and Helen wants to cut, allow breathers, insert cutaways: to build and conquer the arguments. This is evidentiary editing, Pudovkin's montage by linkage (Eisenstein, 1949). Such an approach is a problem for both Joannas who want/s to acknowledge her/their audience. In dialogue that was cut Joanna says, 'For the audience that watches this film, it will make sense'. For Laura Rascaroli, the recognition of the audience as embodied subjects is a core gesture of the essay film and the essay filmmaker (2009: 191). I regret not fighting the battle to keep that line, to show that both Joannas recognise the limits of their film. Not everyone who makes a film intends it to speak to the widest possible audience. Love in the Post is for a specific audience, who are, I hope, good listeners, like Derrida's good readers. Such a position requires re-reading, re-listening, re-watching. A film, or rushes, that have an in-built requirement to be re-watched may have already failed in the eyes of an editor such as Helen.

Joanna makes a film that 'makes no sense' (Extract 2'30")

There is another reason why refusing to cut and shape the interviews was important. For a film that aims to bring forth the material support of its own making, cutting the interviews up would have been a cheat. It would subject the content to conventional documentary systemisation. Deconstruction is a response to systemisation. All films systemise their issues and topics through their modes and genres, even the most experimental. Derrida responds to literary systemisation by playing with the epistolary, philosophical and confessional, theatricalising their interplay. *Love in the Post* plays with genres and registers, attempting to resist its own systemisation in revealing its limits through tricks and tropes: documentary impostors (Theo), real experts as fictional characters (Robert Rowland-Smith), consciously self-conscious directors (Joanna), imaginary universities (Wessex), stolen episodes ('The Purloined Letter') and plagiarised clips (*Ghost Dance* (1984)). There are plot devices such as McGuffins[6] and genre mash ups: performance art/ activist film / art-film / essay film. In playing with these registers and tropes, *Love in the Post*, according to Benjamin Poore, 'embraces Derrida's formal and thematic eclecticism … its elusive quality summons the expansiveness of Derrida's thought' (2015). Such an approach uses 'bricolage, extensive borrowing and theft' (Braidotti, 1994: 36) and is far from the 'serious and systematic' interrogation of film as philosophy that might be preferred by some (Mulhall, Critchley, 2005). Meanwhile the interviews drag on, they go off piste, the interviewees have not been media trained and are

no celebrity academics. There is a structural dissonance. The letter can never arrive at its destination since, if the meaning fully arrived in a complete and present way and one was to receive it and make it clear, there would be no need for interpretation, there would be just downloading (McQuillan, 2012).

'Mais si, mais si', yes but no (Derrida, 1980: 57). The film has of course been edited and does work editorially. The successful interplay between genres and registers is a result of the cutting, for example the jump cuts. These are events in a Derridean sense and may be the 'measure of invention' that Geoff Bennington calls for in what a film based on The Post Card would have to do (2014: 142). These cuts as 'events' are Eisenstein's montage by collision, where 'the image or concept of a scene or sequence exists not as something fixed and ready-made but has to arise, to unfold before the viewer – before the senses of the spectator' (1949: 24). It is, however, extremely difficult to make an edit work as a surprise, as active, as happening, as an event in itself, because editing works towards cohesion, development, progression. It is little wonder that Joanna's editor gave up, as did so many of my editors. The necessarily/possibly not condition of Derrida's postal principle is applicable to editing as a system. There has to be the possibility in the editing that the message of the film may go astray and that it may not arrive at its intended audience as expected. Some filmmakers recognise the necessarily/possibly not but call it different things: the unconscious or conscious (Akerman, 1977: 37), or the arbitrary and contingent (Jean-Luc Godard, 1986: 239). Even if the 'message' does arrive at its destination, this successful arrival remains haunted by the necessarily/possibly not condition. This is difficult to substantiate, not least of all because it requires a revocation of authority, something at odds with authorship and intentionality. This revocation or betrayal arises out of my practice as research, which I see as an inhabiting of a subject and of the subject of me. In the end, Joanna must betray the film, and the film must betray Joanna.
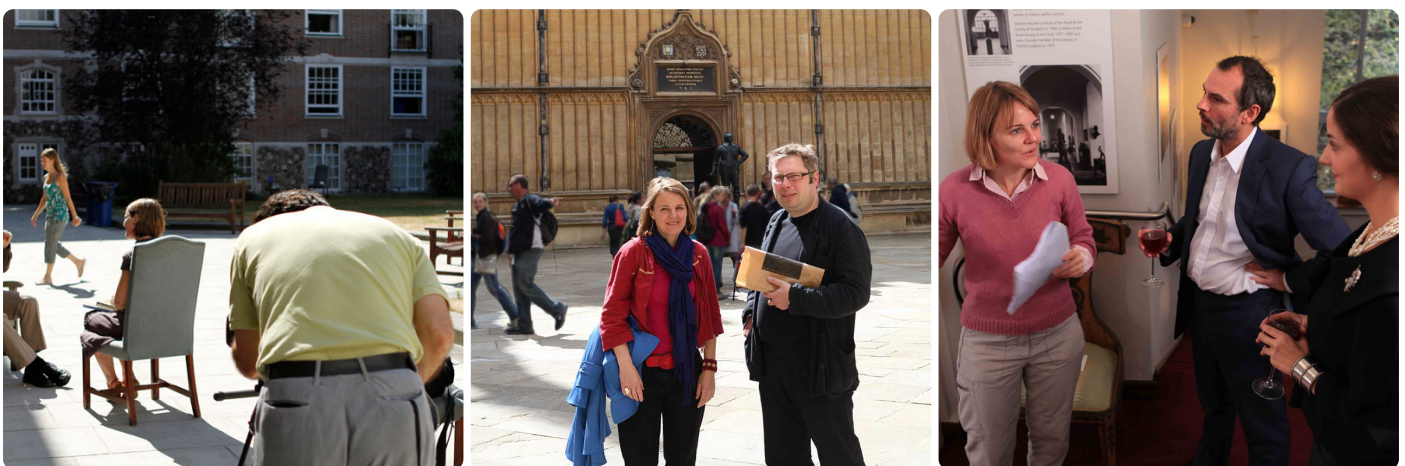
Early interviews at Derrida Today in 2010 / Callaghan & McQuillan in Oxford / Directing actors.

The Institution of Philosophy: Theo Marks

Theo Marks is limping through life despite all his running. In a barren, other-worldly place far from his elegant home and stately university, Theo runs. What is he running from? He doesn't know. His story as an academic reflects on the academy as a site of knowledge and of power. His expertise is under threat from cooler, more attractive subjects and his career as a professor is under constant challenge. His class and background don't help. For feminist student Macey, Theo is a dinosaur and *The Post Card* just 'heterosexist propaganda'. Former student and lover Penelope has already surpassed Theo by getting a job at Oxford. 'I love it when a student of mine gets a better job than me' he says, and she corrects him: 'Ex-student'. Macey and Penelope represent a younger generation of academics used to competition, unstable work environments and to juggling the increasing and varied demands of university life in the age of neo-liberalism. There is an entrepreneurial Head of School, Charles Leavis, who can quote Derrida and balance spreadsheets (and belongs to the right class). He doesn't believe Theo's research claims and advises him to 'forget about all this post card stuff'. Theo limps along, increasingly unsure of his status, but doing his best to uphold the structures upon which he is dependent for his self-identity. At home, his wife Sophie provides another set of worries. She is volatile, strange, different. Her otherness is disconcerting. Theo is troubled also by Joanna, with her release form and directorial freedom, worrying that his intellectual prowess might be forged, stolen, counterfeited.
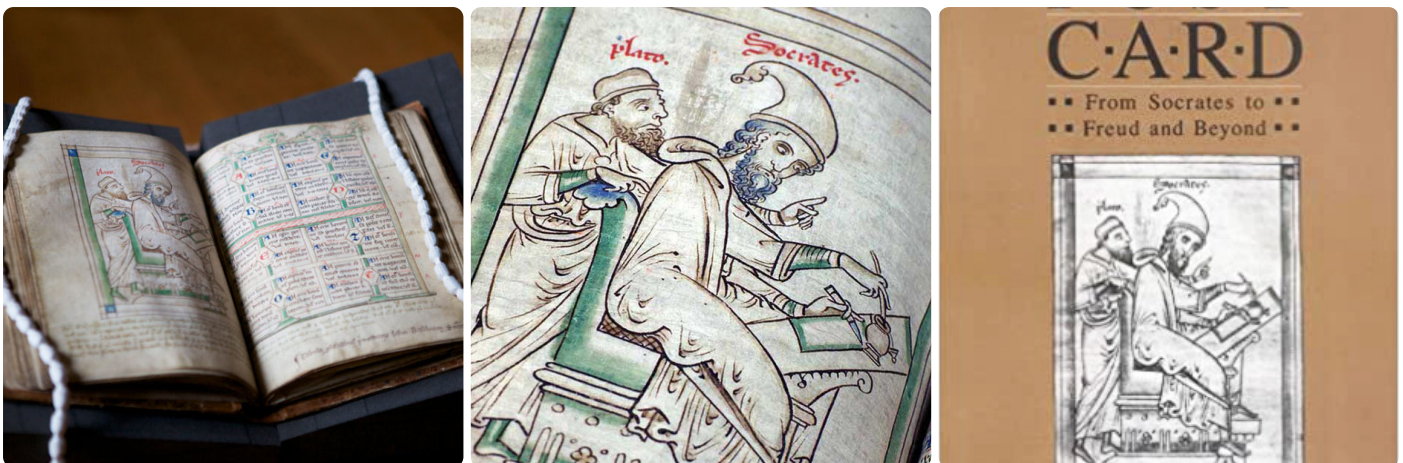

Matthew Paris' medieval manuscript filmed in Oxford / Plato Socrates postcard / Jacques Derrida's The Post Card.

In 'Envois', the narrator finds a post card at the Bodleian library which is a copy of a drawing by the medieval chronicler and artist Matthew Paris. The drawing depicts Plato standing behind Socrates, who acts as scribe. There is no written record of Socrates, we have only Plato's dialogues which feature Socrates. For the narrator of 'Envois', the image shows how Plato used Socrates as his own charac-

ter, putting words into his mouth. In this way, Socrates is a fictional character invented by Plato, thus coming after him. The narrator of *The Post Card*, describes Plato and Socrates as the 'two greatest counterfeiters of history' (1980: 22). The drawing prompts the narrator to re-read philosophy's fiefdom, uncovering the bastards and illegitimate heirs, exposing the forgeries and the counterfeits. Derrida's discussion on counterfeiting reminds us, on a material level, of philosophy as document. Films are also documents. They counterfeit life. Filmmaking is plagued by documents and this is made clear in *Love in the Post*. Acting is a form of counterfeiting, albeit an innocent one. Adaptations are counterfeits of the original text, however closely or not they use that text. Counterfeiting is translation. It follows that as documents, philosophy and film can be copied, forged, plagiarised, vandalised, ruined, burnt, erased. Such radical and violent acts are necessary even if they signal the disappearance of this archive, and along with it the entire project of philosophy, of logos, of gathering. What is to be done? What is the future for philosophy? At the University of Wessex, the future is a merger with the media department into the Bazalgette building. Such a union will be housed under the auspices of the media mogul who founded 'Big Brother'. This may be a crude pointer to corporate sponsorship but could be a possibility in the landscape of higher education where free markets and privatisation reign.[7]

In spite of the cynicism inherent in many of the narrative episodes involving Theo and his life as an academic, Love in the Post is about love of the academy. Even if Theo is a dinosaur and all his post card stuff outdated, the film nevertheless celebrates the academy as a space for the marginal, the excluded, for thinking free from commercial imperatives. It is also a place where class and culture can be transcended as Theo and his Australian colleague prove, even if there is a limit to how far they can go. Just as *The Post Card* is a love letter to philosophy so *Love in the Post* is a love letter to the academy, to film and filmmaking.
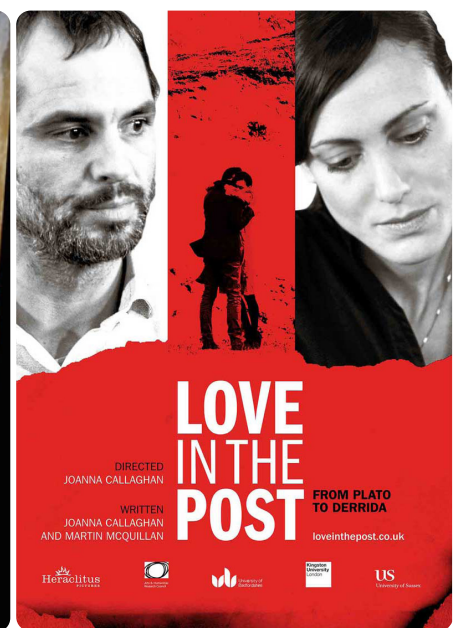
A screening at Home in Manchester / Film poster.

Conclusion

Ontological Narratives has formally spanned a period of ten years, but its roots can be traced from my entry into higher education as a Masters student in 2002. Identifying academia as the site and context for my future as a filmmaker has been core to the success of the project. Situating one's practice within an academic context and being driven by academic approaches and questions, distinguishes the film-making researcher or practice researcher from the professional practitioner. Such positions have been facilitated by the growing understanding and acknowledgement of practice as research, over the last 20 years. Such developments have opened up the academy to different kinds of knowing where 'insightful thought' might be engaged materially as well as abstractly 'in the mind' (Nelson, 2013: 20). Practice as research may unlock insights not gained from typical methods to interrogate subject matter, in my case philosophical content. This form of interrogation is challenging for philosophy because it involves a form of 'handling' of philosophy and this handling is done by some-body who must acknowledge their body and others in and through the handling. Bodies are gendered, raced, aged, cultured, dis/abled and so on and these are brought forth through filmmaking practice as images that fix bodies in space and time. Such fixing might lock down knowledge, conforming and allying it to certain interpretations, but it might also cause upheaval to these interpretations by inserting unexpected or unaccounted for bodies (Dillon, 2018). In this way, my practice as research has looked for those unaccounted bodies, for that which has been hidden, repressed or covered over, and sought to surface these through the stories and characters created. It is possible to see how filmmaking in other subject areas, such as anthropology and ethnography can have similar effects. For example Alastair Cole's film [Colours of the Alphabet,](#) explores multilingual education in Zambia, utlising coloured subtitles, as a form of handling of sound and text, to represent the complexity of multilingual environments. (For more discussion of filmmaking research see journal articles and resources in bibliography).

Philosophical concepts have been the subject matter of my films, mobilised through fictional stories. I have tried not to be didactic in approaching content, but to use fiction to elaborate and contest philosophical ideas through an attention to the materiality of film form and production. The practice-as-research interrogates, reads against and mis-reads philosophical concepts, and in doing so, sets itself 'against' philosophy epistemologically. I am not a philosophy scholar; nor do I want to be. I want to be 'outside' philosophy in order to consider it broadly, as an epistemology and a historical practice. From this unauthorised position I can probe philosophy, poking at its ideas, concepts and practices and asking questions of its legitimacy and canonical function. I want to argue that practice as research enacts questions in unique ways. This performance allows for alternative realities to appear, and in doing so exposes and deconstructs the characteristics of that which has been dominant in preventing such modes of seeing and knowing from surfacing (Barrett, 2009: 144). I would argue that practice researchers must not necessarily be experts in the subjects they are exploring, rather be experts in their practice. This position is essential to creating new knowledge through practice. Where that knowledge sits in terms of

its originality, significance and rigour must be further articulated by the researcher using a framework and language which they are familiar with, not one imposed upon them by the subject matter they are exploring. My approach to my subject matter, broadly speaking philosophy, was to use narrative to perform my research questions. This was novel within the landscape of practice as research where there is relatively little work produced in fiction.[8] This might be because fiction is seen as 'interpretive' and thus potentially problematic depending on who is doing the interpreting and of what subject matter. It could also be because of pragmatic reasons; fiction requires more resources to produce. Either way, practice researchers must push the boundaries of their subject matters through the particular characteristics of their practice. In the case of film practice, it could be in terms of the aesthetics, the genre, style or presentation. This might mean that the practice appears to 'fail' when seen in different contexts, however just as scientific experiments can fail, the failure is an important part of knowledge generation.
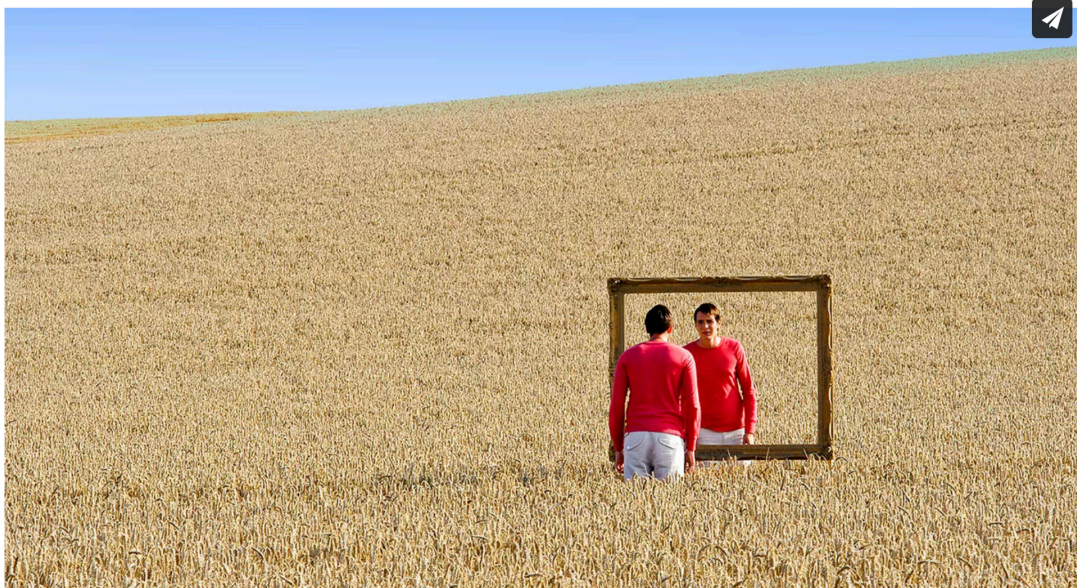
Ontological Narratives explores narrative and narration, its limits, margins and discourse, and the films produced demonstrate an evolving sophistication in the employment of narrative devices. A mind's eye may be the most experimental of the films with its looser use of narrative, visual tableaus and disrupted montage, but it established character as a driving force in the enquiry. The film sets up a visual style for the overall project (enhanced in this case by the scope format) in which human figures are presented in carefully chosen and styled landscapes dealing with being in a world. This being-in-a-world is advanced in *DO NOT READ THIS* where character is placed inside a narrative landscape that resembles (and disassembles) a fictional story through its construction (characterisation, mise-en-scène, setting), genre (thriller mystery) and development (plot, mis-en-abyme). What emerges and is carried over into the next film, is a fluidity – a sense that the film is searching for its own rules and specifications like essay films that are 'integrating into the text the process of [their] own coming into being' (Rascaroli, 2009: 84). Love in the Post built on these previous films, the reception of their outputs and a growing confidence in the use of fiction as a tool to explore philosophical ideas. Through the mix of drama, art film, documentary, experimental and essay film, narrative and narration is stretched into the margins of genres and registers. Bordering fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, possibility and impossibility, the result, according to Charlotte Crofts, 'manages to enact the theoretical concerns explored in Derrida's original text, via the practice / experience of watching the film' (2016). The feature, more than any other output, has had the greatest impact on the field of film as philosophy, on deconstruction and on practice as research, evident from engagement activities, teaching and research in literary theory and deconstruction, and in winning a national research prize as an exemplar of practice as research.
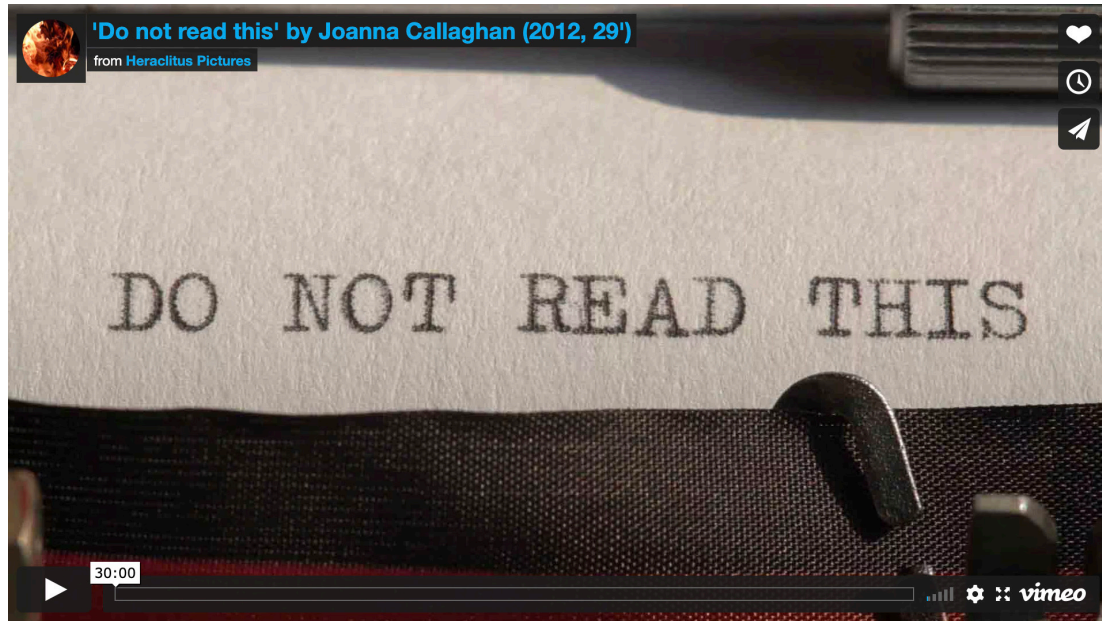
Ontological Narratives has multiple addressees and contexts, positioning it at the intersections of disciplines and groups of scholars, both a positive and challenging place to be. In terms of philosophical discourse, the risk for the project is that because of its outsider position, it may remain marginal and obscure, unable to be incorporated into whatever it is that philosophy may become or thinks it is. 'Philosophy', argues Michèle Le Doeuff, 'has always arrogated to itself the right or task of speaking about itself,

of having a discourse about its own discourse and its (legitimate or other) modes' (2002: 6). Yet its work is 'in the world' (ibid.: viii). If it is to be effectively so, then I would argue that not only must its regime of knowledge production be challenged, but so too must its modes of expression and forms of thinking. The 'who' of philosophy remains core to philosophy's project and that 'who' largely excludes women and women's bodies. This is not only about structural discrimination but because women's ideas, methods and approach to the enterprise that is philosophy may be different from those of men. For Le Doeuff, if women are to be free to philosophise, there must be a transformation that disentangles the individual from the enterprise (1977: 7). This would be a radical re-working of philosophy's self-identity which still relies and perpetuates the myth of the philosopher king. Instead, Le Doeuff proposes that through collective ways of working on problems and ideas, philosophy can renew and transform its role. Creative practice as research presents opportunities to enact Le Doeuff's claims. *Ontological Narratives* demonstrates that collaborative working, whether with other scholars or with creative practitioners, can result in new ways of philosophical thinking independent of philosophy's traditional relations and structures. This is bound up with a feminist standpoint that sought to interrogate philosophy ontologically and epistemologically by inserting unaccounted for bodies into story and film worlds that uncover issues of gender, age, race, class and disability. In handling philosophy through film, the relation between text and image and consequently film and philosophy is re/de-ordered. The goals for *Ontological Narratives* were to invigorate philosophy through a new approach to its enquiry (practice as research) and to bring new audiences to its content (through using fiction). The result is a series of outputs which celebrates film's distinctive potential to embody complex thoughts through emotional registers and which demonstrates the richness and possibility that exists within universities for new ways of thinking and seeing the world.

A mind's eye (Callaghan, 2009, 13')
from Heraclitus Pictures

'Do not read this' by Joanna Callaghan (2012, 29')
from Heraclitus Pictures

Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida (Callaghan, 2014, 80')
from Heraclitus Pictures

ENDNOTES

1   'Being is always the Being of an entity..It is only an entity's place in the world that defines what an entity is' (Lewis & Staehler, 2010: 70). In other words, being is not abstract consciousness – it is always connected to an entity that is in a world.

2   Praxical knowledge is 'the particular form of knowledge that arises from our handling of materials and processes' (Bolt, 2007: 30).

3   *Human all to Human* (BBC, 1999), *Philosophy: A Guide to Happiness* (de Botton, 2000) and *Genius of the Modern World* (BBC4, 2016). See Filmography.

4   *Ghost Dance* (1984), *Derrida Elsewhere* (1999), *The Perverts Guide to Cinema* (2006), *Examined Life* (2008) See Filmmography.

5   In *Parmenidies* Plato argues against the doctrine of forms which Aristotle develops into the 'Third Man Argument'. This argument shows that if a man is a man, because he partakes in a form of a man, then there must be a third form of man which would explain how both form of man and man are both man and so on, ad infinitum.

6   An object or device used to trigger the plot, which may have no narrative explanation and which may remain unexplained and unresolved.

7   These issues were explored in a previous documentary collaboration with McQuillan: *I melt the glass with my forehead* (2011).

8   Statistical evidence comes from the Filmmaking Research Network survey conducted in 2017 in which less than 10% of films submitted were fiction & experience from judging the AHRC Research in Film Awards for the last three years.

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