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# **Ontological Narratives**

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PhD by Published Works

University of Sussex

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I confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

This thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other University for a degree.

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## Thesis Summary

*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 practice as research, carving out a unique position in the field. The project has made this intervention into philosophy from a position of creative practice, and from a feminist standpoint, 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. 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 film 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. In this way knowledge generation is derived from process and outcome, evident in the artefacts created and also expressible through associated commentary. *Ontological Narratives* has been disseminated through public screenings, conference presentations, exhibitions and online distribution.

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	5
Background and Methods	7
A Praxical Approach	10
Ontological Narratives I	17
Ontological Narratives II	22
Ontological Narratives III	26
Conclusion	39
Bibliography	44
Filmography	52
Appendices	55
List of published works	55
List of submitted works	64

## 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 practice as research, carving out a unique position in the field. Sarah Dillon, a Derrida scholar and film philosopher, has argued that this body of work ‘represents a major contribution to the study of film and philosophy in general, and deconstruction and film in particular (2018: 7). The project has made this intervention into philosophy from a position of creative practice, one which is absent from much philosophical discourse on film and from a feminist standpoint, 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, *eíodos*, 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 thesis, I will provide background and methods to my approach and the issues arising. I will summarise each output and describe the interrelationships between the outputs, demonstrating how they make a significant contribution to the fields of film philosophy and of practice as research.

## **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 content. In 2003 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. For my last project *Love in the Post*, a further iteration took place in the form of a book, edited by Martin McQuillan, the Co-Investigator on the project. This included the screenplay, a section I wrote entitled 'Reflections' and essays from McQuillan and others, alongside interview transcripts. My contribution to the book was a commentary on the process derived from my journal and personal experiences. It serves as preparatory writing for this thesis, which benefits from a more rigorous consideration of the process and outputs, and from the passage of time and distance from the project's completion.

### **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. This includes a number of dramas on the lives of fictional philosophy scholars involving affairs with students.[4] There are also documentaries and dramas featuring real philosophers as themselves and others featuring representations of those philosophers.[5] 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). His methods are associated with deconstruction though for Derrida scholar Marc Froment-Meurice 'It's not deconstruction, at all, although it looks like it' (2010). For Froment-Meurice, Godard's quotations are too narcissistic, and narcissism is incompatible with deconstruction since it involves 'a certain overcoming of the ego' (2010). 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. There are countless filmmakers outside of academia that have influenced my work politically and aesthetically and some of these are Agnes Varda, Chantal Akerman, Roberto Rossellini, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Peter Greenaway and Jean Cocteau.

### ***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. Philosophy as philosophy falls outside this remit but if we

approach philosophy as fiction, as a mode of story telling, then issues related to adaptation are relevant. Any film adaptation, according to Brian McFarlane, is 'bedevilled by the fidelity issue', because 'fidelity criticism depends precisely on there being a single, final, correct meaning to which the filmmaker adheres or otherwise violates or tampers with' (1994: 8). Dudley Andrew suggests that film adaptations be classified as borrowing, intersecting and/or transforming, which is a looser way to frame the adaption process (1984). There is also the problem of the 'weight of existing interpretations' around a text (Wheelan, 1999: 7).

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 logocentrism. 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**

*Ontological Narratives I* was funded through grants from the AHRC, University of Bedfordshire, Australia Council and Arts Council England, and was produced by independent production company Heraclitus Pictures. The major output was the short film *A mind's eye* (2009, 35mm, 13'). The project began in late 2007, was shot on location and in studio over 10 days in 2008, and editing completed in early 2009. The film premiered at the Hat Factory cinema in Luton in February 2009. Other outputs included a peer reviewed article, a documentary and a chapter on practice pedagogy. The project was disseminated through conference papers, research seminars, public screenings and exhibition, artist talks and symposia. It 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 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 tableaux, montage, story and dialogue. For example Plato's perfect form became a circular track around the elemental and somatic essences (fire, plant, horse, baby).

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.[6] 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 of 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. 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 (a) of its own medium; (b) of the representations of which this medium is capable; and (c) 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'). Early research and funding applications began in 2010, production took place over ten days on location in May 2011, and editing took 12 months. The film premiered at the Wired Screening room in London in May 2012. The project was disseminated through conference papers, research seminars and public screenings. 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.

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, uncaused, 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.

*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 narrative' (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? Alessandra Hemsley 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.

### ***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, two journal articles, and over 20 papers and presentations. 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). Early research began in 2010 with interviews, project development and script drafts, followed by an AHRC grant award in 2011. Production took place over 20 days in late 2012, and editing took 12 months, with the premiere at Somerset House London in March 2014. 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 from Kingston University. 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*. A book was also produced which features the screenplay, essays by McQuillan, transcripts of interviews and a lengthy personal reflection on the making of the film. 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 and sets out to find who sent them. Sophie, his wife, 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). This latter point is materialised through the most minor of the three characters in terms of screen time, but the most essential in terms of narrative causation and impulse.

### ***Woman and Women's Bodies: Sophie Coutant***

In 'Envois', the female addressee is silent, allowed only to speak second-hand. Her role is muse, container, provocateuse. She receives the correspondence, like the reader, and the message is both for her and not for her: 'My letters are too knowing, stuffed epistles but this is in order to "banalize" them, to cipher them somewhat better. And then in any event, I no longer know whom I wrote this to one day, letters are always post cards: neither legible or illegible, open and radically unintelligible' (Derrida, 1980: 79). Her 'responses', nevertheless, are thoughtful, difficult; she makes trouble, she disavows the narrator's words, she is disobedient (much like other feminist interventions into the world of philosophy offered by Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous). Her pregnancy, a marker that distinguishes her from the narrator, threatens to subsume, consume his discourse: 'To the devil with the child, the only thing we ever will have discussed, the child, the child, the child' (Derrida, 1980: 25). The embodied consequence of their illicit affair rises up, like Plato's erection behind Socrates' back in the Matthew Paris medieval drawing, to disturb the message he is sending (Derrida, 1980). Pregnancy is a powerful force in 'Envois', yet remains relatively ignored by Derrida scholars. Christine Battersby suggests there has been a reluctance by (male) philosophers to develop a metaphysics of birth based on the ontological significance that selves are born (1998: 4). In *Love in the Post*, the multitude of pregnancies, visible and invisible, possibly forged or faked, force the interconnectedness between bodies and selves to the surface, challenging distinctions between mind and body. These pregnant women are the living, breathing consequences of being 'stuffed' with sperm (Derrida, 1980). After the pleasure are the effects: pregnancy, children, a lifetime of caring. But



there are also affects of pregnancy as explored by Jane Maree Maher's analysis of Sally Potter and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* where pregnancy is transformative and 'subjectivity is drawn in and changed by embodied experience, where processes of change enhance subjectivity rather than destroy it' (2007: 29).

Pregnancy in 'Envois' may have been overlooked for the factual elements that make it troublesome and awkward. The addressee and her unborn and born child are slowly killed off, given ultimatums in disguise:

I couldn't answer you on the phone right now, it was too painful.

The "decision" you asked me for is once again impossible, you know it. It comes back to you, I send it back to you. Whatever you do I will approve, and I will do so from the day that it was clear that between us never will any contract, any debt, any official custody, any memory even, hold us back – any child even (1980: 25).

In *Love in the Post*, Sophie delivers these lines, radically altering their meaning and reversing the gender dynamics of 'Envois'. Sophie acts as a versioning of the narrator and of the addressee (she is 'doing' philosophy). Her emotional world is determining the events that unfold within the narrative. As Theo's wife, she offers limited access to her thoughts: her few words at the cocktail party are ambiguous, as are the therapy sessions. She appears distant and enigmatic, but is also bubbling with silent intensity, almost, as woman, monstrous (Creed, 1993). Sophie as narrator performs extracts from the 'Envois' in a salon d'art, with filmmaker Joanna and McQuillan in the audience. These sequences are outside of the linear chronology of the narrative. They are

moments that leak, seep, drip into the margins between characters, stories and worlds. Sophie in her pregnant embodiment creates a distinct relationship to space and time in the film. Her pregnancy symbolises transformation, process and growth, thus splitting her between past and future (Young, 1990: 160).

This woman is a problem. What is she? Who is she? For whom does she speak? In ventriloquising Derrida's words, and inverting the narrative of 'Envois', she, along with Joanna and other women in the film, opens the text to a feminist reading. In this female-centred narrative, characters pull against abstraction, they are embodied, fleshy, they take up space (Frauke), they pop up at inconvenient times (Penelope), they make demands (Joanna) and accusations (Macey). They inhabit the film. These women and their experiences reflect that there is 'not *one* dominant "feminine" response to the female subject-object position...women's predicaments are infinitely variable and so are women's experiences. The identities of women are scored by a variety of forces and disciplinary structures' (Battersby 1998: 3). They are anchored and propelled by Sophie, who in the narcissistic harbouring of an unknown, 'shapeless pre-object', turns inward, distracting her from the world, making her absence present (Kristeva, 2008). This is evident in the cocktail scene, where Sophie reveals her silent power, emotional volatility, and a refusal to play a part in the tête-à-tête.

Yet Derrida must have known what he was doing in introducing the theme of pregnancy in 'Envois' and in the 'risky behaviour' he was undertaking (Burt, 2014: 150). In the linking of different plateaus of experience that weave together academic thought and personal experiences, Derrida was mirroring feminist practices of interrogation. He was connecting 'institutions where

knowledge is formalised and transmitted ... to the spaces outside the official gaze, which act as generating and relay points for forms of knowledge as resistance'. (Braidotti, 1994: 179). For Catherine Malabou, he was not radical enough: in his theatricalising of the death drive and the pleasure principle he teeters on the verge of total destruction but there remains a 'confidence in love' (2014: 165). He says, 'Listen, I am (following) you all the time... ..you are omnipresent here and I cry for you I cry over you...I feel so much smaller than you, I am so afraid of distancing you from life, from everything that awaits you, from everything that the others desire from you' (Derrida, 1980: 108). The letters are at times moving and affective, and also sexual and phallogocentric: 'Imagine the day, as I have already, that we will be able to send sperm by post card...' (Derrida, 1980: 24). The male body forces itself up into the correspondence, playing out its missionary position: the man on top, the woman below. If deconstruction has only one rule: 'allow the other' then in *Love in the Post*, this other is women, and their bodies. Their multitude challenges cinema's 'hierarchy of images' (Ackerman, 1977: 41) and the 'Envois' gender and sexual undecidability. In doing so, argues Sarah Dillon, the film 'is able to materialise women in their embodied reality *and* perform the possibility of gender and sexual indeterminacy, of multiple possible signatories and addressees' (2018: 6).

### ***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.

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[7] 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.

### ***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.

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 character, 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.[8]

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.



## 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. This has 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 philosophy. This 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.

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). The use of narrative as an approach to perform questions has been novel within the landscape of practice as research where there is relatively little work produced in fiction.[9] *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 tableaux 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, mis-en-scene, 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 first prize from the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies, as an exemplar of practice as research.[10]

*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.

## Footnotes

[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] *Oleanna* (1994), *The Human Stain* (2003), *Irrational Man* (2015)

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

[6] 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.

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

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

[9] 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.

[10] See Appendix 1

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## Filmography

### Films about philosophy

*Socrates* (1971) Directed by Roberto Rossellini. Italy: RAI.

*Ghost Dance* (1984) Directed by Ken McMullen. UK: Channel 4.

*Wittgenstein* (1993) Directed by Derek Jarman. UK: BFI/Channel 4.

*Oleanna* (1994) Directed by David Mamet. UK/USA: Channel 4/Samuel Goldwyn Company

*Derrida Elsewhere* (1999) Directed by Safaa Fathy. FRA: Gloria Films.

*Days of Nietzsche in Turin* (2001) Directed by Julio Bressane. Brazil: Grupo nove du cinema.

*The Human Stain* (2003) Directed by Robert Benton. USA: Miramax.

*Derrida* (2003) Directed by Kirby Dick & Amy Kofman. USA: Jane Doe Films.

*Zizek!* (2005) Directed by Astrid Taylor. USA: Hidden Driver Productions.

*The Perverts Guide to Cinema* (2006) Directed by Sophie Fiennes. UK: Amoeba/Lone Star

*When Nietzsche Wept* (2007) Directed by Pinchas Perry. Israel: Millenium Films.

*Examined Life* (2008) Directed by Astrid Taylor. UK: Sphinx Productions.

*Only a God Can Save Us* (2009) Directed by Jeffrey VanDavis. USA/UK/Germany: Terrence Edward Davis.

*The Organisation of Dreams* (2009) Directed by Ken McMullen. UK: Augustine Pictures.

*The Death of Socrates* (2010) Directed by Natasa Prosenc. USA: Kanalya Pictures

*The Perverts Guide to Ideology* (2012) Directed by Sophie Fiennes. USA/UK:

BFI/Film 4

*Hannah Arendt* (2012) Directed by Margarethe von Trotta. GER: Heimatt Film

*Twilight of the Gods* (2013) Directed by Julian Doyle. UK: Bill & Ben

Production

*Irrational Man* (2015) Directed by Woody Allen. USA: Gravier Productions.

### **Television about philosophy**

*Human all to Human* (1999), BBC & RM Television Series 1-3, 1 August 2011

*Philosophy: A Guide to Happiness* (2000) Channel 4 Television Episodes 1-6.

First broadcast 26 May

*Aristotle's Lagoon* (2010) Directed by Harry Killas. BBC, 11 June 2013.

*Genius of the Modern World* (2017) BBC4 Episodes 1-3, First broadcast 24

April

### **Practice-based research about philosophy**

*In Plato's Electronic Cave* (1992) Directed by Garry Hill, Installation

*Remarks on Colour* (1994) Directed by Gary Hill, Installation

*Nietzsche's Paris* (2000) Directed by Victor Burgin, Installation

*The Ister* (2004) Directed by Daniel Ross & David Barison. AUS: Black Box

Sound and Image

Various films and installations by artist filmmaker Philip Warnell, UK

(<http://www.phillipwarnell.com>)

### **Joanna Callaghan Filmography**

*Mrs De Winter's Dualism Dilemma* (2003) Directed by Joanna Callaghan. UK:

Heraclitus Pictures

*Thrownness* (2003) Directed by Joanna Callaghan. UK: Heraclitus Pictures

*A mind's eye* (2009) Directed by Joanna Callaghan. UK: Heraclitus Pictures

*I melt the glass with my forehead* (2010) Directed by Joanna Callaghan &

Martin McQuillan. UK: Heraclitus Pictures

*DO NOT READ THIS* (2012) Directed by Joanna Callaghan. UK: Heraclitus

Pictures

*Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida* (2014) Directed by Joanna Callaghan.

UK: Heraclitus Pictures



## Appendices

### List of Published works - Ontological Narratives I-III (2007-2014)

Principal Investigator: Joanna Callaghan

Co-Investigator: Martin McQuillan (Ontological Narratives III 2011-2014)

#### Practice as research outputs:

2009 *'A mind's eye'*, 35mm film, 13 minutes

2010 *'Making of A mind's eye'*, High Definition Video (HDV), 9 minutes

2012 *DO NOT READ THIS*, HDV, 29 minutes

2010-13 *Deconstructive Film*, HDV, 7 minutes

*Postal*, Animation, 4 minutes

*Letters*, HDV, 8 minutes

*Adaptation*, Video essay, 4 minutes

*Why love Derrida?* HDV, 3 minutes

2014 *Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida*, HDV, 80 minutes

#### Academic Peer reviewed Publications:

Callaghan (2011) "Why read if I want to make stuff?" *The Use of Film in Education*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing (pg 240-257) (book chapter)

Callaghan (2012) *A mind's eye*, Screenworks, Vol. 3

Callaghan (2012) "The Post Card", *FRAMES*, University of St Andrews. Vol.1

Callaghan & McQuillan (2014) *Love in the Post*, Rowman & Littlefield (250 page monograph)

**Awards:**

Winner First Prize for 'Best Practice Portfolio 2016', British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS)

**Grants awarded:**

2007 Australia Council (£10,000)

2007 Arts Council England (£5000)

2007 Arts and Humanities Research Council practice-based research award (£20,000)

2008 Research grant, Research Institute for Media and Design, University of Bedfordshire (£15,000)

2008 Research informed Teaching, Teaching and Learning, University of Bedfordshire (£15,000)

2010 Research grant, Research Institute for Media and Design, University of Bedfordshire (£10,000)

2010 Teaching and Learning Grant, University of Bedfordshire (£5000)

2012 Arts and Humanities Research Council research award (£60,000)

2012 Research grant, Research Institute for Media and Design, University of Bedfordshire (£20,000)

2012 Research grant, Kingston University (£20,000)

2013 Research grant, University of Sussex (£3,000)

**Public screenings:**

2009 hat Factory Luton

2010 Whitechapel Art Gallery London

- 2010 Nottingham Playhouse
- 2010 Centro Cultural de Lagos, Portugal (6 week exhibition)
- 2011 Watershed Media Centre, Bristol,
- 2012 Electric Shadow cinema London
- 2012 Wired Cinema London
- 2014 Somerset House London
- 2014 Australia Centre for the Moving Image Melbourne
- 2014 Andrew Stewart Cinema, University of Glasgow
- 2015 Judith E. Wilson Drama Studio, University of Cambridge
- 2015 HOME Arts and Cinema Centre Manchester

**Academic Presentations: Keynote and Plenaries (with screenings)**

*Post-digital Encounters*, Journal of Media Practice symposium, University of West of England, 24 June 2011 (keynote)

*Practice and Pedagogy*, Higher Education Academy, Oxford Brookes, 5 June 2012 (keynote)

*Derrida Today*, Fordham University, New York, 30 May 2014

*Film Philosophy*, University of Glasgow, 3 July 2014

*Derrida*, University College Dublin, 14 November 2014

*Imagining Derrida*, University of Cambridge, 30 January 2015

*New forms of Philosophy*, Manchester Metropolitan University, 19 June 2015

*Media Practice Research Symposium*, Goldsmiths University, 3 Nov 2015

National Association for Higher Education in the Moving Image, University of the Creative Arts London, 7 July 2017

### **Invited research presentations (with screenings)**

*Film and Philosophy*, Edge Hill University, 20 May 2009

*Ideas and Things*, Research presentation, University of Bristol, 26 Jan 2010

*Seven Little Postcards*, Goldsmiths University London, 10 May 2011

*DO NOT READ THIS*, University of Glamorgan, 19 June 2012

*Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida*, University of Hertfordshire, 4 Mar 2014

*Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida*, University of Sussex, 12 Nov 2014

*Film and Philosophy*, Northumbria University, 16 May 2016,

*Birkbeck Arts Week*, University of London, 17 May 2016

### **Conference Presentations:**

*A mind's eye*, Australian and New Zealand Art Historians Conference, Griffith University Brisbane, 15 December 2008

*Teaching Practice*, MeCCSA, University of Bradford, 15 January 2009

*Inquiry Through Practice*, Teaching & Learning Conference, University of Bedfordshire, 10 June 2009

*Ontological Narratives*, Film & Philosophy, University of Dundee, 17 July 2009

*Ontological Narratives II*, MeCCSA, University of Bedfordshire, 8 January 2012

*On screen, on the couch: Derrida's The Post Card*, Visible Evidence, Australian National University, Canberra, 19 December 2012

*Doing Philosophy*, Sightlines, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, 23 November 2014

*Deep thought and the sound byte*, MeCCSA, Bournemouth University, 8 January 2014

*Reproduction prohibited*, Motherhood and Creative Practice, Southbank

University London, June 2015

*No art without politics*, University of Barcelona, 11 May 2017

### **Reviews:**

Wee, C. (2009) *A mind's eye*, AP Engine.

Adams, J. (2012) *A mind's eye*, Review for Screenworks Vol.3

Grant, I. (2012) *A mind's eye*, Review for Screenworks Vol.3

Poores, Benjamin, "Philosophy on Film", 10 Sep 2015, Times Higher Education

Reisz, Matthew, "Cinematic Deconstruction: Derrida gets a close up", 27 March 2014, Times Higher Education

Rogers, Alan, "Love in the Post – Peter Coyte", 4 April 2016, [Reel Music](#),

Thoughts and reviews on music used in film & TV

Atkinson, S. (2016) Review for BAFTSS prize & Screenworks Vol.6

Crofts, C. (2016) Review for BAFTSS prize & Screenworks Vol.6

Barrow, S. (2016) Review for BAFTSS prize & Screenworks Vol.6

### **Writing on:**

Dillion, Sarah, *Deconstruction, Feminism, Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh

University Press, 2018) (chapter 3: Adapting (In) Fidelity)

### **Citations:**

Royle, Nicholas, "Foyer", *Discourse*, Volume 37, Numbers 1-2, Winter/Spring 2015 pp. 138-147

Steven Marsh (2014) Editor's introduction. Untimely materialities: Spanish film and spectrality, *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 15:3, 293-298, DOI: 10.1080/14636204.2014.972118

**Collections (*Love in the Post*)**

Auckland University of Technology (AUT)

American University of Paris

Amherst College

Birkbeck, University of London

Boston College

Brown University

Bristol University

Carleton University

Concordia University Libraries

Cornell University

Criss Library University of Nebraska Omaha

Dickinson College

Duquesne University

Fordham University

Gettysburg College

Glasgow School of Art

Goldsmiths University

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

Harvard University

Hong Kong Baptist University

Imperial College London  
John Carroll University, Grasselli Library  
La Trobe University  
Los Angeles Public Library  
Macquarie University  
Manchester Met University  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
McGill University Library  
Monash University  
New York University  
Northwestern University  
Nottingham Trent University  
Southeast Missouri State University  
Stony Brook University  
SUNY Broome Community College  
University at Albany  
University of Barcelona  
University of Bedfordshire  
University of British Columbia  
University of California, Berkeley  
University of California, Irvine  
St John's College, University of Cambridge  
English Faculty, University of Cambridge  
University of Edinburgh  
University of Glasgow

University of Guelph

University of Hull

University College London

University of Jerusalem

SOAS, University of London

Unitec Institute of Technology

University of Melbourne

University of Michigan - Ann Arbor

University of Newcastle

University of Northumbria

University of Pennsylvania

University of South Wales

University of Southern California

University of Sydney

University of Technology, Sydney

The University of St. Thomas

University of Rochester

University of Surrey

University of Sussex

University of Texas at Austin

University of the West Of England

University of Westminster

Victoria University of Wellington

Virginia Commonwealth University

Yale University



York University

Washington University

**Private collections**

Allan Chasanoff Collection

Danielle Arnaud Galleries

**Private sales**

Over 500 private sales of the DVD and Bluray of *Love in the Post*

**Library holdings (*Love in the Post: Screenplay and Commentary*)**

Book listed as having 626 holdings (Worldcat)

## List of Submitted works - Ontological Narratives I-III (2007-2014)

### Films supplied on USB:

2009 *'A mind's eye'*, 35mm film, 13 minutes

2010 *'Making of A mind's eye'*, High Definition Video, 9 minutes

2012 *DO NOT READ THIS*, High Definition Video, 29 minutes

2014 *Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida*, High Definition Video, 80 minutes

### Book:

Callaghan & McQuillan (2014) *Love in the Post, The Screenplay and Commentary*. Rowman & Littlefield (250 pages)

### Research Sketches available online:

<http://loveinthepost.co.uk/research-in-progress/>

2010-13 *Deconstructive Film*, HDV, 7 minutes

*Postal*, Animation, 4 minutes

*Letters*, HDV, 8 minutes

*Adaptation*, Video essay, 4 minutes

*Why love Derrida?* HDV, 3 minutes