Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication
Volume 11 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ejpc_00013_1
Received 4 May 2020; Accepted 26 May 2020

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On William Lyons' short films about Wittgenstein (*The Examination*) and Arendt (*The Letter*)

ABSTRACT

Can the history of philosophy transcend the reconstruction of facts and the causal relationships that bind them together? As such, it can also be said to facilitate the analysis of key philosophical problems inherent to the act of communicating the history of philosophy itself. In this article, such a possibility is explored from the vantage point of William Lyons' short films The Examination (2015) and The Letter (n.d.). These productions re-create certain episodes in the life of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hannah Arendt with an eye to institutional and moral issues of philosophical significance.

KEYWORDS

memory
communication
history of philosophy
short film
Wittgenstein
Arendt

This article analyses the film adaptations of two passages taken from William Lyons' theatre plays *The Crooked Roads* (2015) and *The Fir Tree and the Ivy* (2019). The passages, taken from the former and the latter, respectively, eventually became short films known as *The Examination* (Burke-Kennedy 2015) and *The Letter* (Lyons n.d.). In the former, Lyons explores the personal and institutional dimensions of Wittgenstein's thesis defence in Cambridge in 1929.

In the latter, he approaches, from the point of view of Hannah Arendt, what her relationship was with Martin Heidegger. In neither case does Lyons seek to deliver a historiographic interpretation focusing on the mere reconstruction of the facts. On the contrary, he is rather interested in offering an interpretation that allows us to address the philosophical problems that are inherent to the act of communicating the history of philosophy. In *The Examination*, Lyons aims to portray the Wittgenstein who defended his thesis as a mature philosopher and confronted his evaluators not as a disciple but as a fellow. For that reason, the episode in question turns out surrounded by power games wherein the institutionality and validity of the philosophical canon prevailing in the analytical tradition dominant in Cambridge in the late 1920s are implicitly involved. In *The Letter*, Lyons tackles an even more complex problem – the reconstruction of the figure of Martin Heidegger from the memories shared by Hannah Arendt with her former thesis director Karl Jaspers on the occasion of the latter's 85th birthday. Here, Lyons' short film shows us the moral and intellectual challenges that not only Arendt but the entire second half of the twentieth century has faced when thinking about Heidegger's image – an image that is inseparable not only from his philosophy but also from his political and moral commitments.

WITTGENSTEIN: THE AUTHOR BEFORE AUTHORITY

Wittgenstein's work, especially his *Tractatus*, is covered by a thick fog that prevents his genealogy from being understood with accuracy. This problem can be partly untangled if we go back to the thought of Russell in the first place and, above all, of Frege. However, it ultimately remains an unsolvable issue to this day. This becomes evident when we stop to analyse the way in which section 6.41 of the *Tractatus* begins to address subjects related to how traditional philosophy has tried to account for fundamental problems of human life, such as its meaning, the value of our moral claims, the role of beauty in our world-view and the religious significance we attribute to some facets of our life experience. It is true, as Putnam claims (2011: 31), that Wittgenstein cannot be understood as a philosopher who devoted himself to religion in the strict sense. Still, it is revealing that, from his conception of language, towards the end of the *Tractatus*, the Austrian philosopher thinks of the contours of the mystical experience in terms of silence, as a residual effect of his reduction of language to logical form (Wittgenstein 2000: 179).[1] This view must have had a decisive influence on the fact that – at the end of the defence that landed him with the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge in 1929 – Wittgenstein told his examiners '[d]on't worry, I know you'll never understand it' (Monk 1997: 257). This statement was not only addressed to Russell and Moore but, above all, to those who try to find in his thinking a firm ground from which something can be deduced about the traditional problems of philosophy. This portrays the originality of Wittgenstein's thought and also, as I said in the beginning, the difficulty of recognizing his genealogy.

The inclusion of Wittgenstein and his work in a signifying space such as the university, far from appearing to be immediately relevant, often slips unnoticed despite its obvious symbolic implications. In efforts such as those previously undertaken by Derek Jarman in his feature film *Wittgenstein* (1993), the problem of inclusion and resistance that the university as a social institution posed in the wake of Wittgenstein's work (as did the then-recently formed mathematical-philosophical canon) is not addressed in light of the dialectical

1. I am specifically referring to sections 6.431 and 6.4311 as well as to 6.521 and 6.522 (Wittgenstein 2000: 183).

games of opening and closing that ultimately gave Wittgenstein the possibility of obtaining his doctorate at Cambridge in 1929. In this sense, William Lyons proposes the reconstruction of a particular episode, namely the defence of Wittgenstein's doctoral thesis, as a space for understanding the pathos that the tradition–institution–novelty triad displays from the moment Wittgenstein is examined to obtain the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

PATHOS: THE DARK ROOM OF DECISIONS

Although in 1928, as Monk maintains (1997: 239), Wittgenstein was determined to return to Cambridge to resume his philosophical pursuit, his re-entry to the institution meant the return to an experience that needed to be transcended and re-signified in both material and symbolic terms. In this sense, the return to Cambridge required transforming his figure and rethinking himself no longer as an enthusiastic engineering ex-student who wanted to be mentored by Russell but as the determiner of his own philosophical-vital destiny.

The transit from 'Wittgenstein the student' to 'Wittgenstein the doctor' is pervaded with meaning that can hardly be understood without a dramatic representation of it. This becomes patent in Lyons' *The Examination*. The biographical reconstruction of that moment speaks volumes of the institutional ambivalence and dichotomies that any evaluation process implies – a matter that cannot be appreciated through the study of Wittgenstein's texts. Moreover, it allows us to understand the rite of passage of one of the fundamental thinkers of the twentieth century as a representation of how philosophical-academic institutions are to face the constant challenge of renewing themselves. Such representation does not depend on the actor's abilities to portray Wittgenstein in one way or another, but on the possibility to see, in what appears to be merely an anecdote, an episode of university transformation, a process whereby academic institutionality is renewed by admitting within it a kind of conception and practice of philosophy that was absolutely novel at the time. In other words, the representative possibilities destined to show us that the emotional and institutional dimensions of philosophy itself are not subordinate to the actor or the setting; they manifest themselves through their connection with a part of us that awaits to be reflected in that which is performed. In this sense, although it could be said that the script written by Lyons is represented by amateur actors, if you will, the goal of showing that both Wittgenstein and his *Tractatus* were under an institutional strain to gain recognition is clearly achieved. Furthermore, if the point was to show that the act of making a decision – in this case, that of granting Wittgenstein the degree of Doctor of Philosophy – is full of affective forms that arbitrarily cross the minds of the deciding subjects, the objective is also fulfilled, since Russell and Moore knew the magnitude of the work and its significance before the exam.

The above is far from just restating that, in the context of formal education, the *Tractatus* had by itself enough weight to become one of the essential works of the twentieth century in the history of philosophy. Instead, it acknowledges that the said work, as Lyons suggests, did not escape institutionalized forms of acceptance and recognition any more than Wittgenstein himself did. It is worth noting that, from the point of view of the audience, the staging of this episode is at first glance simple, rudimentary and perhaps not quite finished with regard to its scenery and musical score. However,

notwithstanding what any specialized film critic might observe, I think that, as far as the representation of the passage goes, what is important to realize is that even with precarious means and little rehearsed acting (or even overacting), the symbolic register from which the human condition is represented as the foothold of all philosophical textuality is successfully pushed to the forefront. In the Cambridge episode, it is not the *Tractatus* alone that is marked as passed or failed. Wittgenstein himself is also being graded. This is quite a different matter, for does the institution deal not only with a specific work but also with an author with his own sufferings and prejudices, who demands to be recognized and validated too. The representation of the conflict that the university qua institution faces when it has to examine Wittgenstein is key to understanding the way in which contemporary philosophy actually makes a life for itself in the academic space.

The *Tractatus* fulfils all the requirements for Wittgenstein to obtain the doctoral degree, but only his physical presence enables the institution to carry out the ritual whereby the student is recognized in such a qualitatively distinctive fashion. In this vein, from a communicative-pedagogical perspective, Lyons seeks to show that philosophy is about concepts and reasons but, at the same time, about people and institutions. This, I believe, is the most important aspect to highlight, because, as obvious as it may seem, we tend to lose sight of it. The matter is analysed by Lezra (2012), who advances the idea that 'institutions', as many other universals, are ontologically defective, that they are made of non-evident and eventually contradictory rules and practices that must be followed by citizens in different manners depending on the role each of us must play in certain historical contexts. Lezra insists in the idea that due to this 'defectiveness', institutions implicitly challenge people to obey, follow rules and perform roles in ways that reveal how arbitrary their standards are. So, only by performing their standards do academic institutions reveal that philosophy is also a practice with implicit codes of conduct, according to which concepts and reasons must always face someone's body in context in an institutional practice.

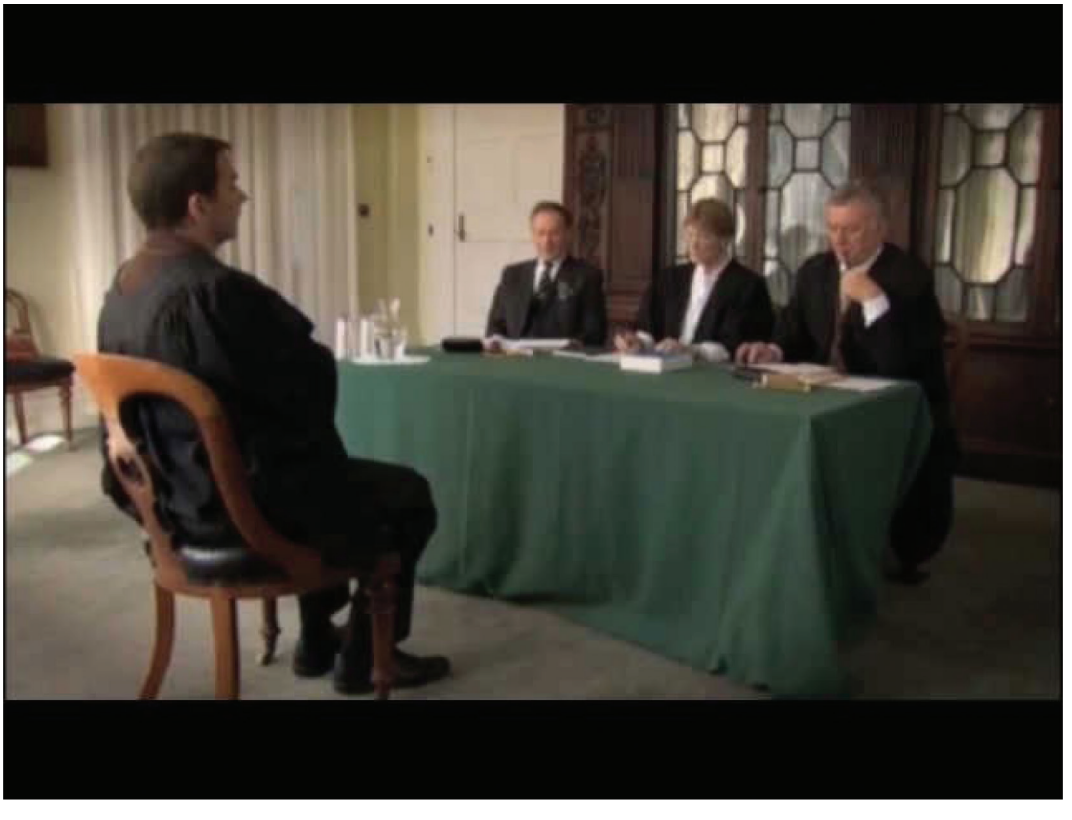
Hence, teaching philosophy without attending to this reality does not seem very convenient if the goal is to show the very nature of philosophizing. It is for this reason that philosophy cannot be reduced to a merely theoretical-speculative activity, for it is also a vital attitude towards circumstances. I think a good part of Lyons' effort – not only in the representation of this scene taken from *The Crooked Roads* but in his general attempt to account for philosophy as a dialogical situation – goes into showing that ultimately, as it happened in Cambridge on 18 June 1929, the institution and the person must meet in a material and affective sense – beyond the merely theoretical – if they are to persist in time. In this regard, I would like to add that considering philosophy a 'dialogical situation' is part of what McGinn (2007) refers to as an effort of embedding concepts in dramatic situations. In this sense, what Lyons remarks is that Wittgenstein's philosophy can be described not only as a new way of understanding logic (and philosophy in general) but also as a quest for peer recognition. To that end, philosophy must be performed in a dramatic code, that is, by following a dialogical structure.

Representing this need for recognition and transcendence requires the use of meta-argumentative resources, the effectiveness of which is assured not only by their intrinsic quality but also by their ability to communicate such a pathos. This would be impossible by relying on mere concepts and their logical-argumentative variants. Not in vain, both Lyons and Jarman place their

bet on a type of authenticity that need not be explained for it to be part of a mechanism that helps the viewer reach a human reality only accessible through performance and acting. The issue about authenticity emerges at the moment of analysing fiction's possibilities of arising philosophical questions based on drama, tragedy or comedy instead of mere conceptualization or abstract reasoning. This is something that McGinn (1997) remarks, pointing out the fact that in contemporary moral philosophy, in contrast with classic moral philosophy,[2] the absence of concrete examples taken from people's lives or fiction characters to explain moral reasoning from different perspectives is evident.

Thus, Lyons chooses to include a woman in the examination room and Jarman, for his part, chooses to introduce an alien into his film about the Viennese philosopher. Both try to show that representation, more than history in the strict sense, puts us in contact with the human dimension from which thought emerges. Therefore, whatever the room in which Wittgenstein was examined, the kind of representation from which Lyons attempts to portray that moment does not seek to reduce itself to a historiographical account but rather to use the historical context to represent the way in which Wittgenstein and his *Tractatus* were examined. Jarman manifests the same will to assert the

2. Here we should also include medieval and some instances of modern moral philosophy.



Video 1: The last part of Wittgenstein's examination at Cambridge in 1929.

The video for this screengrab is available in the online counterpart of this article https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/ejpc.

power of representation above that of history to show the human dimension of philosophical thought processes. This becomes evident when, to describe Wittgenstein's childhood, he uses a semi-naked boy who, wearing a crown, says that his family is 'obscenely rich'. Both cases show that the communicative-representative power of the audio-visual space can allow us to conceive facets of philosophy related to affects beyond what history itself points out. Perhaps, and I do not think I am exaggerating about this, the art of acting is fundamental insofar as it allows us to understand affects from a perspective that is closer than that which a documentary (facsimile-like) representation of historical facts would permit.

It is in this sense that, although the representative work requires actors to be able to represent what is sought to, the power of representation is never in the means employed but in the ability to generate links between what is represented and the spectator. In this case, the latter would ideally be someone closely related to the university and interested in grasping the ways in which its institutionality is ultimately subject to an affective dimension that in the end is unavoidable – as Wittgenstein experienced it back in the day, as it is today despite any number of technological advancements.

This, I think, is what Lyons tries to make clear from the beginning – the representation of Wittgenstein's life allows us to clearly understand the process of institutionalization of philosophy, in the sense that discerning a philosophical thesis or proposal is not enough to satisfy the university from the pedagogical-institutional standpoint. In this sense, the scene depicted in *The Examination* is nothing but a christening, Wittgenstein's christening as a doctor, a matter for which his presence, and not only his work, is essential.

THE LETTER: AN APPROACH TO ARENDT'S INTIMATE IMAGE OF MARTIN HEIDEGGER

Unlike *The Examination*, in which Lyons focuses mainly on the figure of Wittgenstein, and in particular on the way in which the Viennese thinker defends his doctoral thesis in Cambridge in 1929, in *The Letter*, Lyons' vision does not revolve around a person and his conflicts but around a relationship between philosophers – in this case Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger.

As is known, the relationship between Arendt and Heidegger was fraught with controversy – a matter that transcends the sphere of the affective and settles in the sphere of the moral, an aspect that separates and confronts them at the same time, both philosophically and personally.

The character of Hannah Arendt from *The Letter*, as presented to us by Lyons, is an already established intellectual settled in New York as a professor at The New School for Social Research, an academic capable of addressing the most pressing political issues of the twentieth century without any other commitment than the defence of free thinking. However, despite this recognition as an independent intellectual without partisan-political commitments, Hannah Arendt was never able to completely remove herself from her relationship with Martin Heidegger. Although this relationship was never one of dependency, it makes it evident how difficult it is to think of philosophy without the emotional ties that keep us connected not only with the work of others but also with their gestures and emotions. This connection that remains between Arendt and Heidegger is addressed in passing in Margarethe von Trotta's feature film Hannah Arendt (2012), in which the life of the German philosopher is narrated with a view to the formation of her anti-totalitarian thought against the background of her reflections on Adolf Eichmann's trial.

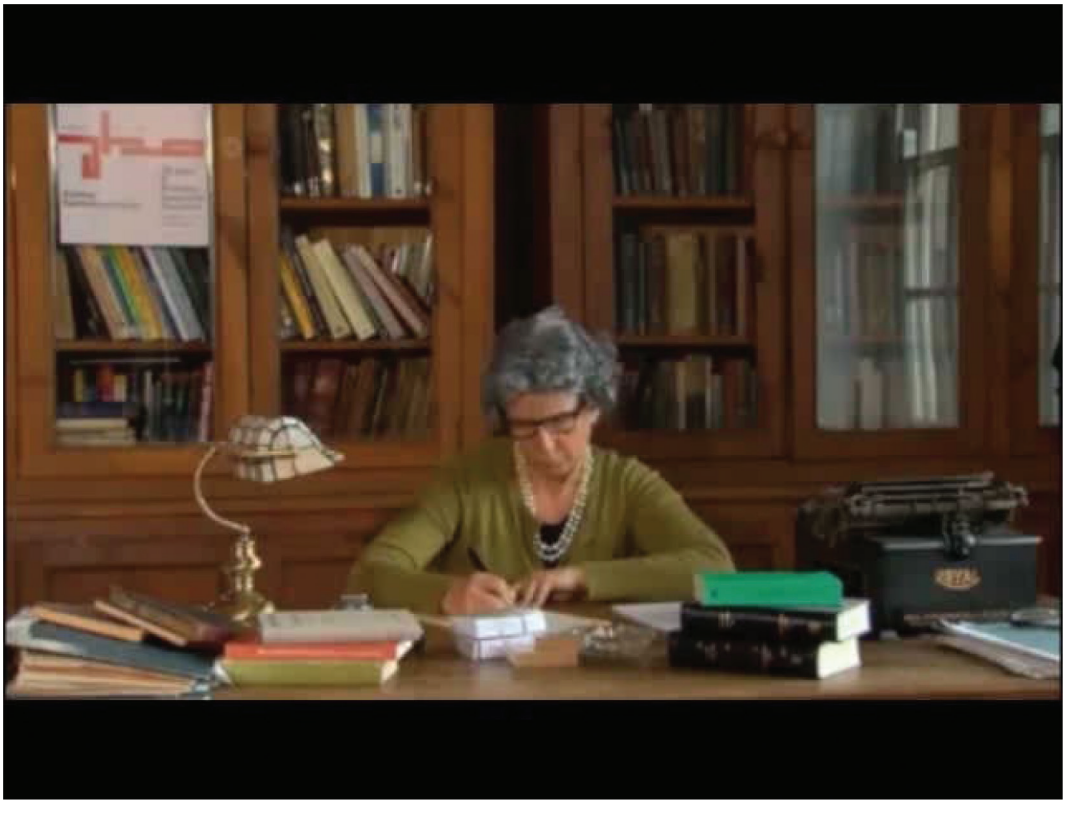
That is why – from the moment Lyons begins the reconstruction of Heidegger's figure from what Arendt tells us about herself – the controversy over the intellectual's political and moral commitment jumps to light. The idea that one never knows what one becomes in the eyes of the others, as Heidegger told Arendt when she was just 19 (Arendt and Heidegger 2000),[3] immediately comes to mind to making us aware of the fragility of our memory – both individual and collective – especially regarding how we return to the image we have of our teachers, their moral commitments and their political positions.

In *The Letter*, Lyons' main objective is to confront, in a fictitious manner, a mature Hannah Arendt with her former teacher. To that end, the chosen vehicle is the process of writing a letter addressed to her former mentor, Karl Jaspers.

The staging of this narrative encounter between Arendt and Heidegger could not be more eloquent: the camera slowly goes through the philosopher's desk and shows *Sein und Zeit* and Husserl's *Formale und transzendentale Logik* on a pile, as a gesture to point out that the lives of both thinkers, no matter how much Heidegger disowned his teacher, would be destined to be related by virtue of their works forever.

On the other hand, also at the beginning of the short film, Arendt's voice is intermingled with images of the 'Aktion wider den undeutschen Geist', in which the Nazi apparatus burns with pleasure the books that it considered

3. Letter from Martin Heidegger to Hannah Arendt dated 2 October 1925.



Video 2: Arendt remembering Heidegger while writing to Jaspers.

The video for this screengrab is available in the online counterpart of this article https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/ejpc.

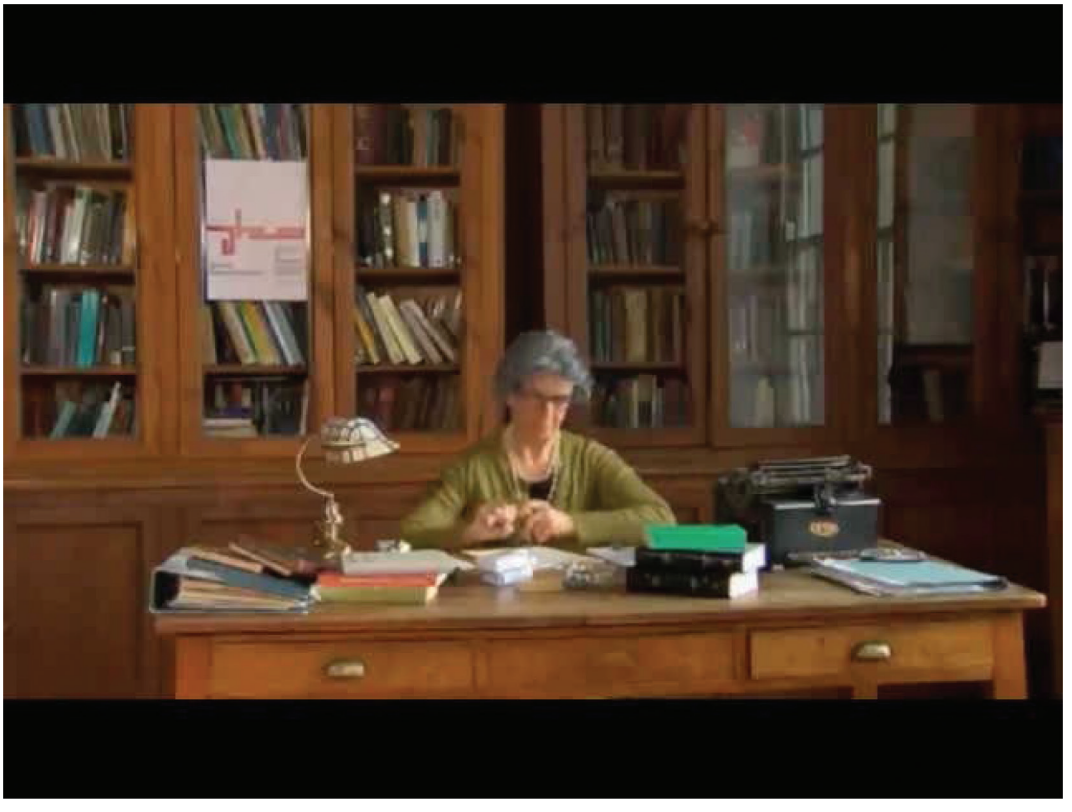
inconvenient for the development of the Third Reich. Memory, gestures and representations are related in ways that only cinema can describe, as Sean Cubitt implicitly remarks in his article on Chris Landreth, 'Ryan' (2004). Along these lines, it is possible to say that by focusing on Arendt's gestures, such as her calm walk to the window, or her introspective talk about the Ivy, Lyons manages to unify past and present as only cinema can.

The gesture of showing the images of the 'Aktion wider den undeutschen Geist' and then displaying the works of Heidegger and Husserl together at Arendt's desk in New York that January of 1969 tells us of Lyons' intention – to show us a thinker far from idealization, one determined to tackle the conflict between Heidegger and his political past and, precisely from there, to think about the image that she has of him, an image that we can either share or reject. I think that, in this respect, Lyons shows how necessary it is to avoid any kind of romanticism and idealization when facing both history and the 'other': memory seems fragile enough to obscure it with idealizations that take us away from philosophical reflection in general, even more so given the kind of moral reflection we need in order to understand the consequences of the problematic relationship between politics and philosophy during the twentieth century.

Lyons' film shows, first, that Arendt writes the letter to Jaspers on the eve of his teacher's 86th birthday, that is, a few weeks before his death. This makes of the letter in question more than a tribute to the career of her former thesis supervisor. It is also a farewell framed in a mosaic of memories from which Arendt seeks to reconstruct her own identity, as a disciple and a teacher at the same time, vis-à-vis her relationship with Heidegger. In this vein, the context against which Arendt reconstructs her relationship with Heidegger is a shared memory with Jaspers; the suffering, rupture and sadness therein form the fundamental axis whereby Arendt discloses herself and realizes how, through the tribute she pays to Jaspers, her identity as a thinker is constituted through in light of the political and intellectual history of the twentieth century.

It is worth noting in this regard two fundamental expressions that make their way in Arendt's account and allow us to understand Lyons' portrayal of the philosopher's personality through her relationship with Jaspers and Heidegger. To the former she says 'I have survived' and 'you have survived'. In the setting where both Jaspers' and Arendt's life unfolded, this is both a sort of thanks to fortune and – above all, and here we must highlight Lyons' enormous effort to bring Hannah Arendt closer to her readers – a humble act of recognition to the power of otherness to change destiny in just a second. The above serves to show that, just as he did with Wittgenstein in *The Examination*, the light in which Lyons presents us with Arendt does not pretend to be objective. That is, Lyons does not mean to say who Hannah Arendt 'objectively' was. On the contrary, his gesture is considerably more complex and problematic since Lyons tries to bring us closer, in an intimate fashion, to how Hannah Arendt thought. This calls for dwelling on the idea that our own representation of the philosopher will gain in authenticity inasmuch as the process of understanding her philosophy be rooted in her own voice.

On the other hand, regarding Heidegger, Lyons allows Arendt to pronounce an expression that shows her moral stature: 'forgiveness'. This is a term that, in the wake of all the suffering caused by Nazism, is difficult to pronounce even today. I think that at this point Lyons confronts us not only with the image of Arendt but with that of ourselves; Lyons is not only showing a portrait of Arendt' he is transforming Arendt into a mirror so that we look at our reflection, with our grudges and fears, and ask ourselves if we are able to forgive even without



Video 3: Arendt thinking on forgiveness and the problematic relationship with her mentor.

The video for this screengrab is available in the online counterpart of this article https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/ejpc.

the repentance of those responsible. Was not Paul Celan, as Felix Duque (2015: 16–17) points out, apparently subjected to the excruciating silence of he who does not want to repent when, in 'Todtnauberg', he asked Heidegger if he did not regret having supported Nazism? Apropos of this image of Arendt forgiving Heidegger, let us also recall Celan's verses on the subject of his encounter with Heidegger in his poem 'Todtnauberg': 'forest sward, unleveled, / orchis and orchis, singly' (Celan 2005: 161–62). Furthermore, let us also remember the Heidegger of 1925, telling Arendt at the age of 19 that his responsibility will be that nothing in her shatters (Arendt and Heidegger 2000).[4] How painful is it when he who promises to protect you drops you and your loved ones when you need him most? To what extent does someone who subjects the beloved to the most regrettable indifference is worthy of forgiveness? These questions certainly emerge when we go through the correspondence between the young Hannah Arendt and Heidegger and still stand when Lyons shows us Hannah Arendt writing to Jaspers that Heidegger never comments on her works. It is evident that Heidegger's refusal to respond and comment on Arendt's work is not a product of carelessness; it is probably a conscious and deliberate decision: is Heidegger perhaps not present in Arendt's critique of the position that philosophers have traditionally taken on politics? (Arendt 1996: 23). Does Heidegger represent for Arendt the image of the platonic philosopher that comes from the

4. 'I can take care that nothing in you shatters; that any burden and pain you have had in the past is purified; that what is foreign to you and what has happened to you yields' (quoted in Nixon 2015: 64–65).

academy to change the political order, as if he had the ability to see beyond all human beings? These questions echo in those of us who read Arendt and watched Lyons' short film. Arendt's forgiveness is not earned by Heidegger; she gives it out of gratitude for the effort he made to bring her closer to philosophy. Herein lies what is arguably Lyons' most powerful symbol in his narrative. At one point in the dramatic representation, Arendt observes the ivy and comments, '[i]vy is meant to cling, and cannot grow taller than its tree'. The phrase is full of ambivalence and ambiguities that are worth commenting on. At first sight, Arendt recognizes in the figure of Heidegger one of the greatest thinkers of all time, thus placing herself and her entire work in a lower position compared to Heidegger's, as would happen with the branch of an ivy in relation to the tree from which it is born. However, if we read carefully the enigma that Lyons places before us, perhaps it is not Arendt who is the branch of that ivy, on the contrary, perhaps, it is Heidegger himself who will never be able to rise to her moral standards. If this is right, far from being an apprentice, Arendt would become the teacher, and Heidegger the disciple who is to see in the forgiveness granted by his former student a gesture from which to learn. Not surprisingly, in the same year – 1969 – after the death of Jaspers and on the occasion of Heidegger's 80th birthday, Arendt told him in her commemorative speech that good thinkers grow older without really getting old, which is somehow a course as well as a blessing (Arendt and Heidegger 2000). With these words she recognizes, despite the political commitments that overshadowed Heidegger's life, his greatness as a thinker. This is a recognition that can only come from someone who has forgiven and decided to move forward, thus preserving in herself the best of those who have accompanied her without thereby effacing the question concerning moral responsibility in human actions.

CONCLUSION

Lyons' short films allow us to understand various philosophical problems that normally lie submerged within the institutional logic of the history of philosophy without receiving any serious attention. In the first place, historiographic reconstruction, in the context of philosophy, is not only the reconstruction of arguments and facts; it is also a communicative fact. In this sense, as a communicative fact, the history of philosophy requires being subjected to a certain 'plasticity' to be understood since, more than facts, philosophy is interested in ideas and concepts as well as in their relationship with those who understand and share them. For this reason, as simple an event as the defence of a doctoral thesis might be, it quickly turns into *The Examination*, not only as an important moment in Wittgenstein's life but as an episode through which we can begin to reflect on to the relationship between Wittgenstein and authority, as well as between Wittgenstein and institutionality. By this we mean that the history of philosophy, in providing concepts with context, also endows them with specific stories, mundane if you like, linked to the opinions and peculiarities of those who discuss and transform them. That is why, rather than seeking objectivity, the history of philosophy seeks to understand the uniqueness of each concept, of each idea and of each thinker. Hence, the dialogue with the subjective, that is, with the individual dimension of the subject, turns out unavoidable and therefore in conflict with the ideal of absolute objectivity.

Likewise, when thinking about Hannah Arendt, the problem about the nature of our moral categories is shown from the moment we enter the memory and the voice of Hannah Arendt herself, not only her texts or

her arguments. It seems, and in this Lyons manages to be very sharp, that when it comes to thinking about the consequences of pain and suffering, the testimonial vision – the voice in the first person – is far more eloquent, given that it does not seek to establish links with objectivity, but with the intimacy of one who demands to be heard. That intimacy is clearly exposed in *The Letter*. However, despite the fact that Arendt's voice speaks to us, her voice is also that of others who had to go into exile, the voice of those who were betrayed and persecuted, and who even today are finding forgiveness in their hearts. Perhaps the history of philosophy, as we know it, evades these concerns. Nevertheless, they are real concerns that become closer to us via alternative communicative devices such as those designed and utilized by Lyons.[5]

5. I am grateful to professor Carlos Roos from Leiden University for translating this article from Spanish to English, and also for his detailed and careful comments on the problematic relationship between philosophical concepts and poetry in classic as well as contemporary philosophical thought. I would also like to thank professor Williams Lyons from Trinity College Dublin for his comments about his plays, which benefited this article tremendously.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Vásquez, Miguel E. (2020), 'On William Lyons' short films about Wittgenstein (*The Examination*) and Arendt (*The Letter*)', *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication,* 11:1, pp. 67–78, doi: https://doi.org/10.1386/ejpc_00013_1

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