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## Evolution of Thomas Elsaesser's Concept of the 'Mind-Game' Film: A Personal Assessment

### Intellectual Collaborations

I worked with Thomas Elsaesser for over three decades on numerous projects. Our intellectual collaboration began in the early 1990s, soon after I completed my Ph.D. thesis ('Filmic Meaning: The Semantics-Pragmatics Interface') under his supervision. Thomas invited me to co-teach on the MA Film Theory class he had just established at the University of Amsterdam. I travelled regularly from the UK to Amsterdam in the 1990s, where I gave presentations on *mise-en-scène* theory, statistical style analysis, narration, and videogame logic. We collaborated on writing up our separate MA seminar notes as a book. This took several years, but the co-authored volume eventually emerged in 2002 – *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press). It is a record of those heady Amsterdam seminars from the 1990s, and we were pleased to see our film theory book sell several thousand copies and be translated into Italian and Japanese. It was during this MA class that both of us developed theories of complex storytelling in the 1990s, with current films released in the cinema – including *12 Monkeys* (1995), *Lost Highway* (1997), *eXistenZ* (1999), and *Memento* (2000).

In another collaboration of sorts, I edited an anthology on ‘film semiology after Metz’ in 1994-95. Thomas invited me to publish it in his new book series, Film Culture in Transition. *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind* (Amsterdam University Press, 1995), my first book, appeared as the fifth volume of the series. (The series is still going, with over 50 volumes.)

We spent a decade, from 2008 to 2017, on one of his major projects – to publish his collected essays in a series of volumes. This was no mean feat – not only because he published several hundred essays, but also because he usually had several drafts of each. Thomas entrusted me to read his various drafts, to suggest edits and rearrange the table of contents. The first volume, *The Persistence of Hollywood* (New York: Routledge) came out in 2012. I remember the difficulties we faced trying to keep it under 250,000 words. Thomas graciously recognized my efforts with a paragraph-long comment in the book’s Acknowledgements. Additional collections of essays followed. The final volume of his collected essays is yet to be published.

### **The Mind-Game Film: 2006-2017**

One of the most ambitious ideas Thomas developed was that of the ‘mind-game’ film, an idea that underwent numerous revisions since its first formulation in 2006. I was fortunate to be able to include Thomas’s first major statement on the mind-game film in my edited collection *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). My puzzle film project formally began in September 2005, with the following email to friends and colleagues: ‘I’m planning to put together a book proposal on complex storytelling in contemporary World cinema. The book will cover complex storytelling in both American cinema (*Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* *Memento*), Wong Kar-Wai (especially *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*), Korean cinema (Hong Sang-soo), European cinema, and others’.

Thomas’s concept of the mind-game film crystallised in written form the following year, in 2006. His ideas came together in a keynote paper written for and presented at the international Colloquium ‘Moving Images - The Morphing of the Real and Its Vicissitudes’, held at Tel Aviv University on June 7-9, 2006 (Thomas presented his paper on 7th of June in the evening). Thomas sent me the first draft as an attachment in an email dated 22 August 2006: ‘here it is’, he wrote in the accompanying email, ‘not quite in the way I presented it in Tel Aviv, but with all the half-finished thoughts and repetitions of a spoken presentation. It will at least give you an idea whether (some of) it fits into your book’. The attachment, called ‘Mind-game Movies: Tel Aviv Paper’, is almost 14,000 words

(the paper plus many pages of additional notes). Thomas again entrusted me to read this draft and to suggest edits.

On 6 September 2006 I sent Thomas the following email: 'I have now read your paper on mind-game films, and would like to open my "complex storytelling" volume with it – or, at least, an edited version. I have carved out a short (6,500 word) paper from your much longer paper'. Unfortunately, I can no longer locate this short version, although I remember reducing Thomas's references to Žižek and Deleuze. But, clearly, my editing was too severe, for the final version that ended up in my *Puzzle Films* book is 11,500 words.

On 27 April 2007 I sent the book manuscript to the publishers. At the last minute I added *Puzzle Films* to the title, with the former title (*Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, minus the word 'world') serving as the subtitle. In my Introduction to the volume I stressed the narratological dimension of the puzzle film.

Thomas was always uneasy with the term 'puzzle film', for it suggested to him a problem that simply needs to be unravelled and resolved. He also contested my exclusive emphasis on narratology, for he conceived mind-game films not simply as narratological puzzles to be deciphered but as films that are 'symptomatic for wider changes in the culture's way with moving images and virtual worlds' ('The Mind-Game Film', p. 39). In his chapter he did draw upon narratology, but also psychology and psychopathology, history and politics, and Žižek, in order to develop his ideas around schizophrenia, paranoia, amnesia, the risk society, and his notion of productive pathologies. In a world of risk, contingency and uncertainty, he argued, paranoia is no longer a pathology, but is a rational way of dealing with the contemporary world, as a mode of adapting to it. He argued that the mind-game film addresses 'epistemological problems (how do we know what we know) and ontological doubts (about other worlds, other minds)' ('The Mind-Game Film', p. 15).

Due to the success of the puzzle film book, I decided to edit a sequel, called *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (Routledge, 2014). I again approached Thomas to contribute. In an email dated 5 August 2013, he wrote: 'Personally, I am fascinated by the phenomenon of "retroactive anticipation," i.e. the loop where something is recognized in the present as having been anticipated in the past, which is, of course, an effect created in the present in order to make the past enable or empower the present'. He suggested analysing this phenomenon in the many Hollywood adaptations of Philip K. Dick's fiction. In November of the same year we were both invited to present keynotes at the conference 'Film, Virtuality, and the

Body' in Rome, where Thomas updated me on his chapter, now called 'Philip K. Dick, The Mind-Game Film, and Retroactive Causality'. It was published in the volume in 2014.

A few years after completing this extraordinary essay on Philip K. Dick, Thomas began rethinking his conception of the mind-game film. In another collaboration of sorts, he sent me early drafts of his ideas. He gradually reworked the mind-game film using the concept of 'distributed agency'. He presented the paper at the conference 'Fast, Slow & Reverse: Faces of Contemporary Film Narration: 'Around Mainstream Cinema', in Gdańsk, 24–25 May 2017 (where both of us were again invited to give keynote presentations). He published the final version as 'Contingency, Causality, Complexity: Distributed Agency in The Mind-Game Film' ("New Review of Film and Television Studies", 16, 1, [2018], pp. 1–39), an essay which he generously dedicated to me. In the abstract he noted that 'this essay complements my earlier symptomatic, sociological and economic reading of mind-game films ('The Mind-Game Film', 2009) with a reassessment of their status as a privileged (though minoritarian) object of study for contemporary cinema from a philosophical perspective. This essay also updates the analysis given in the 2009 essay, mindful that there have in recent years been a number of popular big-budget films that qualify as mind-game films' (2018, p. 1). The abstract then lists what he considered at the time to be the twelve key features of mind-game films:

"(1) multiple universes, (2) multiple temporalities, (3) causality between coincidence and conjunction, (4) feedback: looped and retroactive causalities, (5) *mise-en-abyme* constructions, (6) the observer as part of the observed, (7) living with contradictions, (8) imaginary resolutions no longer dissolve real contradictions, (9) antagonistic mutuality under conditions of distributed agency, (10) agency – with the self, against the self, (11) time travel films as black boxes and (12) the mind-game film as *pharmakon*" (2018, p. 1).

He concluded the abstract by noting that, 'Ultimately, mind-game films amplify ontological instability and dismantle both the sovereign subject and its antidote, the divided self of modern subjectivity, in view of accepting more complex but also self-contradictory, more limited but also more extended forms of agency' (2018, p. 1).

### **The Mind-Game Film: Unpublished Papers From 2019**

Thomas tackled the mind-game film again in 2019 while formulating the topic for his as yet unpublished collection of essays on complex storytelling and the mind-game film. These 2019 papers include the following titles (the dates

indicate the time he emailed them to me, and the quotations are from his description of the papers in his emails):

‘Toggle Bars and Tipping Points’ (22 April 2019; revision on 27 April)

‘the first six pages of my new introductory chapter’.

‘The History of the Present as a Paranoid Mind-Game’ (29 April 2019)

‘this is the first and very rough draft of what I now think might become the final chapter of my book. I’ve written it as lecture notes for the last session of my Columbia Mind-game class tomorrow, so it’s not at all worked out. Hopefully, however, the outlines of an argument do emerge, which should also justify my symptomatic/parapractic reading of the mind-game film, against narratological, cognitivist and phenomenological approaches to puzzle films’.

‘Why Mind-Game/Puzzle Films’ (3 pages; 30 May 2019)

‘a new 12 point list about mind-game films, which might serve as the underlying rationale of my Introductory chapter’.

‘The (Re-)Turn to Non-Linear Storytelling: Counterfactual History and Looped Narratives’ (15 September 2019)

Thomas presented this paper at the Screenwriting Research Network conference in Porto on 14 September. It is primarily about non-linear storytelling, and Thomas does not use the term ‘mind-game film’ (although non-linearity is one of its features).

This proliferation of papers in 2018-19 attests to Thomas’s intense desire to reformulate his concept of the mind-game film. I thought he had finalised it in his 2018 paper ‘Contingency, Causality, Complexity’, with its twelve variables. But he wanted to push further. To me it seems that the 2019 introductory notes and papers are spin-offs from that 2018 paper, developing specific variables rather than reformulating the entire mind-game framework. With the concept continually under revision in his mind, it is impossible to know where next he would have taken the concept of the mind-game film.