Panoptikum 2019, 22: 43-50.

Agnieszka Piotrowska

University of Bedfordshire

Thomas Elsaesser and I – a memory

I met Thomas Elsaesser at the Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference in Montreal in March 2015. I was hanging around the Routledge book stand looking at my newly edited collection *Embodied Encounters: New Approaches to Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Thomas came up and picked up one of the books, also at the stand. I noticed the title and said: 'Oh this is a great volume' and he said, smiling and winking at me 'I know I wrote it'. I was delighted to have met him as much of his work is of course foundational for anybody studying film. We laughed and joked about how we were checking out that our books were at the publishers' stand. I said: 'But I am really a filmmaker and new to academia'. Thomas asked if he would know anything I had done and I replied that perhaps *Married to the Eiffel Tower* (2008), a documentary film of mine about women who fall in love with objects and more people, a film which has become very well known internationally. 'Aha' Thomas said 'yes, I know it well. It is a sort of a documentary mind-game film, right?' and then we talked and talked, and never stopped talking for almost five years, until he suddenly died, so unexpectedly in China. This is how we met. That is in any event one version of the introduction. Michael Renov has another one and he always says he in fact introduced us at the Columbia drinks party later that day – but the encounter at the stand was indeed the first time we actually met, Renov's subsequent introduction notwithstanding. From that moment we became close friends, with Thomas Elsaesser adopting the position of the mentor and a father figure to me. Whilst I accepted this situation in principle gladly and gratefully, I was probably a difficult protégée as I saw him as brilliant but also patriarchal.

We spent many a discussion arguing about asymmetrical power relationships in cinema and in society and we both treasured our differences.

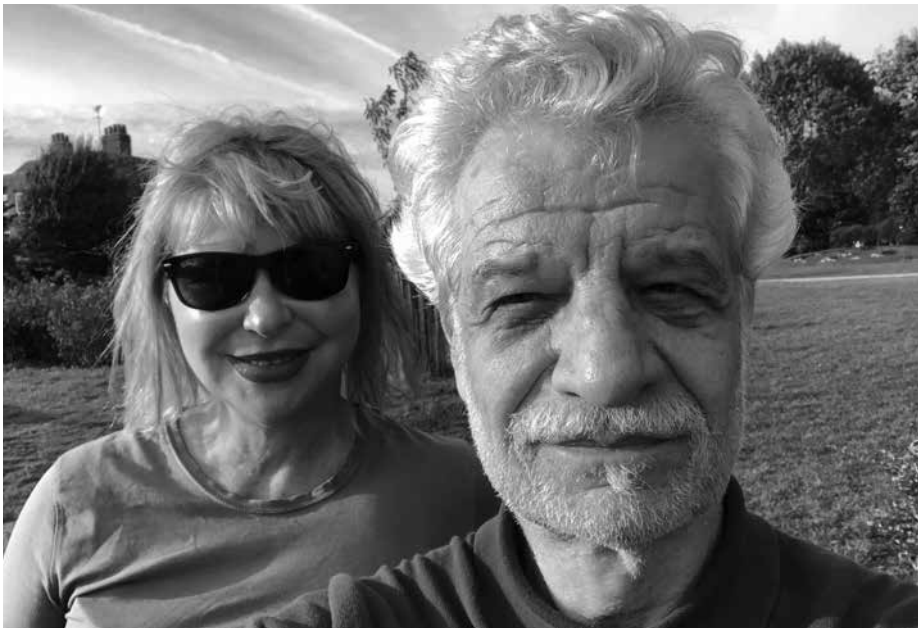
The 'father figure' idea which started as a sort of joke took root and Thomas became so much more in my life than a senior colleague. I introduced him to WhatsApp and on it we exchanged thoughts about life, cinema, culture, our friends and families, and just about everything, sometimes several times a day. It was the most special and unique relationship of my life, without a doubt, as it would not have been easy to categorise it: it was uncannily reminiscent of my relationship with my late distant and intellectual father, yes, but clearly different: we were also fellow scholars, be it separated by different generational expectations and different experience. We met regularly, including at Gdansk University where we overlapped a little with our visiting professorships in 2018-2019, but there were also other occasional conferences and workshops. We had a huge public disagreement at the Screenwriting conference in Porto in September 2019 but we made up soon after. We always discussed our differences and always found a way to carry on the friendship. Our rows – which were many and all about intellectual disagreements – were also quite similar to those I had with my father before he passed away. We talked about that too and how life brings these surprises to us all, the repetitions and miracles of being alive. Thomas was particularly interested in my writing and my filmmaking, and encouraged me to develop my fiction writing too – a project still under construction.

At that time too when we first met, already in his 70's Thomas was developing his film project – a documentary about his family, a film which was eventually completed in 2018. This project was important and reminiscent of Roland Barthes's notion of the importance of 'late work' (2011 [1980]). In a discussion of his own desire to do something new late in life, Barthes talks about 'a Complete Break' (2011: p. 214), a phrase that refers to an older accomplished thinker (or writer or artist) trying something totally new, 'a Beginning, a Vita Nova: a rebirth'. Barthes explains that such a project relates to one's desire: 'to be immortal is to be completely reborn; the work to be written is the mediator of this second kind of immortality' (ibidem.: pp. 214–15). That is to say, an immortality in which in one's work will develop and change with the creator, continuously learning and creating something that will be different, innovative and generally fabulous[1]. Barthes gives examples of such moves by some writers (Mallarmé, Michelet, Proust) and of course his own planned novel was to be such a Complete Break. I wonder if Thomas Elsaesser's film project, completed when he was 75, might have been

[1] One could argue that one of Barthes's attempted 'Complete Breaks' was the acknowledgement of the return of the author which he too was so involved in demolishing in his previous work.

designed to be that too – a complete break and a new beginning. Whether it was a further desire to assure his and his family's immortality is less clear, but there might well have been an element of that too in the undertaking.

Over the years, Thomas was on many occasions the first reader of my books and articles, as well as of my creative work, which he was particularly interested in as that was something he was wanting to develop for himself. He enjoyed my documentary *Lovers in Time*, which was completed at the time of our first meeting in 2015 and which we then co-wrote a chapter about for a book on World Cinema (2019); he was the first critic of the feature film I made in Zimbabwe (*Escape*) and subsequent projects, short films and my experimental drama *Repented* (2019) that he was particularly fond of. He wanted to move away from purely scholarly work and become more of an artist so we talked about that extensively.



It is in this context that I invited Thomas to be one of the keynotes at a conference I organised at my own institution in 2018, the University of Bedfordshire, provocatively entitled "Creative Practice Research in the Age of Neoliberal Hopelessness". I wanted to hear about Elsaesser's long-fulfilled ambition to make a film and what knowledge he might have felt he produced during its making. We discussed the project at length and were excited at the new challenge. Dur-

ing his keynote he coined the phrase 'tactical compliance', which became a very controversial notion at the conference and also in the forthcoming book inspired by it (which I am editing and which will appear in 2020 published by Edinburgh University Press). It is hard to critique a work of such a notable scholar, even when he is a friend, and even more so now that he is gone. Thomas' film and the talk he delivered at the conference, which will be included in the forthcoming book, fascinating though it is, focuses less on knowledge or knowledges (as Haraway (1988) would have it) but more on what creativity might mean in general and what the practicalities of making of his first film were. In terms of his film, he wrote about the necessity of a particular moment in time (involving a German Bank taking over a building his grandfather had designed), his grandfather's legacy and an uneasy relationship with his German producer. Elsaesser's essay describes his decision to proceed to work with the professional producer and editor in order to get his film made despite having profound professional and personal issues with them. In other words, despite his reservations, he decided to work with these professionals in the spirit of 'tactical compliance'. Here the phrase simply means an opportunistic but necessary decision to use those who had a professional experience of putting things together despite conceptual and professional difficulties. At the time of the conference, his keynote phrase was a basis for heated discussion, some of which is reproduced in the forthcoming volume.

The film is based on Elsaesser's family's home movies, shot by his father before and during the Second World War. Home movies from any historical period have a certain charm about them and this is no exception. The core of the film is the story featuring his grandfather, a notable architect Martin Elsaesser, and his wife Liesel, Thomas Elsaesser's grandmother. In the documentary we discover that his grandmother had a stormy and passionate love affair with her husband's colleague, a garden designer called Leberecht Migge. It was Migge's dream to create a self-sustaining paradise of a garden which would offer both nourishment and beauty. He and Elsaesser's grandmother did set up such a paradise island outside Berlin, called *The Sun Island*, which is also the title of the film.

In May 2016 Thomas asked me, his junior friend but also an experienced documentary filmmaker who has made many films for broadcast television, to look at his first edit of *The Sun Island* and suggest changes/improvements. At that time Thomas Elsaesser was already infuriated by his producer Reihart's ideas regarding a possible inclusion of some general archival footage from the Second World War in the film – as a visual and contextual juxtaposition to the home movies Elsaesser presented. I saw a three-hour long assembly in Amsterdam. It was a very difficult session and I wrote long emails to Elsaesser after the

event, which I will not be reproducing here. Suffice to say, I suggested dramatic cuts, writing a strong narrative and working closely with the television professionals as the film needed a firm and experienced hand. I felt that as there were already people involved it would not have been right for me to be involved beyond that advice as that might have confused matters further. I despaired over the difficulties but suggested it might have been to the film's benefit to stay with the producers. I also knew I would have wanted to take over the project creatively which was not something Thomas would have welcomed at that point.

In my emails there was something else though, something far more important, and this line I will quote here: 'I can understand Reihart trying to create something against the background of the actual historical events – it is not idiotic, it's an attempt to make it all clearer. This was not just a love story. War was raging in Europe'. For me then, and now, the bracketing of the atrocities of the Second World War is a conceptual and ethical flaw in the film, and possibly has made it into a questionable ethical gesture. There is a disquiet about focusing only on the idyllic life on the island and the romantic affairs of its inhabitants without any engagement whatsoever with the storms of the war of Europe at the very same time and his family's involvement in it, including the male relatives being in the German army at the time, and wearing Nazi swastikas, a fact that is mentioned only in passing. On the other hand, his mother was in fact Jewish, and hiding at the time and then had to carry on hiding, in peace times in Germany, a very common trait and also one that I am familiar with in my own family.

Regarding Thomas Elsaesser's piece of work, I am indeed amongst many people who get 'special thanks' at the end of the film. I am certainly in good company there as Michael Renov is credited too. Some of my suggestions of writing a strong narrative and cutting the film dramatically were implemented – but not the crucial one. The film as is disavows the simple fact that in some way Elsaesser's family, like so many others in Germany at the time, was indeed complicit with the Nazi regime. The words 'compliant' and 'complicit' have the same etymological root and in some way mean a similar thing: to be acquiescent with a certain course of action. The failure to acknowledge more clearly – at least in visual terms, never mind in some kind of deeper reflection – the atrocities of the Nazi regime which the Elsaesser family were in some way involved in, can be viewed as ethically problematic. Perhaps it is indeed the difficulty at getting at the feminine auto-ethnographic statement here but perhaps also there is a desire to hide from the demands a painful recognition of one's own historical legacy, which in Thomas Elsaesser's case is in fact two-fold: Nazi and Jewish. So more discussions followed, and what I have written below is in part a result of these exchanges.

In the now classic work on post-war trauma, *The Inability to Mourn* (1967), the German psychologists Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich make a point that the Germans quickly identified with new post-war regimes without dealing with their long commitment to Hitler, creating systems of denial and forgetting. It was as if the Germans chose not to deal with the past. As a result, the authors claimed more than 50 years ago, the German psyche may have never freed itself from Hitler because it did not go through the rituals that true mourning demanded. What is quite extraordinary here is that Thomas Elsaesser used the Mitscherlichs's research in his own academic work quite extensively, in his discussion of New German Cinema in his volume of 1989. Discussing Mitscherlich, Elsaesser confirms: 'Instead of discussing this past, Germans prefer to bury it' (1989: p. 242) and yet, somehow, when it came to making his own film these concerns are put aside.

Thomas' silence is palpable not only in the film but also in his keynote and in the book chapter. In some ways, therefore, he missed an opportunity for a more profound production of knowledge relating to his personal legacy of the Second World War that making of such a deeply subjective film may have offered. He was insistent he did not wish to include 'the bigger picture' – 'no, not in my family film', he would say, and he refused to amend it. As friends and colleagues, Thomas and I discussed the matter at length after the conference and after many screenings of his film, including some in Poland and in Amsterdam, which I introduced. We discussed the matter last time in late November 2019 and agreed that the book for Edinburgh University Press should go to print the way it was and that there might be time for 'a further deeper reflection' in due course. We were happy to leave it this way – an open ended conversation, like so many, but with a hope that a further development would follow.

Unfortunately, and shockingly, Thomas died unexpectedly in China on 4th December 2019 at the beginning of his lecture tour. As it happens, he showed his film to the Chinese students at Peking University and this is what he wrote to me in an email of 3rd December or it might already in fact have been the 4th December his time, perhaps one of his very final emails: 'So far I have found very appreciative but also very smart and critically astute audiences. Tonight's screening of my film was a special event, with Chinese subtitles and very good discussion after. Peking University is the top in the country and the quality of the students shows it. I am very lucky'. It appears that Thomas Elsaesser died happy, even if we all felt it was well before his time. He died pretty much a few hours later, becoming unconscious in his sleep and never re-gaining consciousness.

We were scheduled to discuss the illustrations for his chapter the following day but this was not to be. What remains is a trace of our discussions and 'the deeper reflection' that Thomas Elsaesser was preparing to write will now not happen. *The Sun Island* remains a very special and moving film but it is also an example of how very hard it is to produce knowledge out of auto-ethnographic material and how potentially ethically problematic such a project might be when the subject of the interrogation is our own life or that of our family.

In his reflection on the process of creation (and writing in particular), Barthes sets out 'three trials' (2011: p. 173): the first one is to decide to embark upon 'the Work' at all, choosing 'the object', the second one is the 'step-by-step management of' the work and the third one is 'the moral trial' including a decision of how the work 'fits in with the social (historical social)' (ibidem, p. 173). Elsewhere in the book he talks about the ethical always trumping the aesthetic and that it is a hard call. Barthes calls one's commitment to the Work potentially 'heroic' – 'an uncompromising attachment to a Practice' (ibidem, p. 281), which clearly is in direct opposition to any form of tactical compliance. One has to say that Barthes did of course write many very influential works – but *not* the very final one he wanted to write. Many reasons could have been behind that but undoubtedly any 'uncompromising Practice' is excruciatingly hard, a lot harder than many people realise. Whatever anybody's views on Thomas Elsaesser's film might be, it is very clear that his whole life and work is a testimony to his heroic and indeed uncompromising attachment to his practice, which of course includes first and foremost his academic work but which also includes this film, *The Sun Island*, his love letter to his family. Thomas Elsaesser took risks and never stopped exploring and expanding his intellectual horizons – for our benefit too. He was also prepared for the younger generations to discuss and critique his work, teaching us all how to open spaces for the generative intellectual engagement. There is no doubt at all that his work and his spirit will continue to be a guiding light for us all.

Because of the nature of his passing, which was utterly unexpected, it is hard for me not to continue checking my phone, as I have done for almost 5 years, to see if there is perhaps a text from him. It is impossible to accept that there would be no further communications, no further guidance, or argument, or just anything. That part of our friendship is over. As a friend and a mentee I am bereft. As a scholar and an artist, I begin to understand that what is left is the richness of Thomas Elsaesser's work and his thoughts as written and that this is plenty for us all to draw from. His encouragement and faith in the power of creativity and academic rigour stays and will need to be enough now to guide us.

As creative practice researchers, we need to keep questioning the rules, the law, the attitudes, the systems. We need to cross boundaries in order to stay faithful to our internal campus and question that too. Thomas Elsaesser was one of the most difficult people I have ever known. He was stubborn, single minded, irritatingly short-tempered at times, he could appear narcissistic and preoccupied. He was also breathtakingly erudite, intellectually and emotionally generous, funny and very respectful of my work and that of others. He was endlessly forgiving and tolerant, immensely optimistic and curious about new ways of seeing things and boundlessly grateful about what the world had to offer. To say I will miss him is the understatement of my life but I also feel very lucky to have had the chance to learn from him and to be his friend, 'his creative inspiration', as he said many a time, and his intellectual sparring partner in the last 5 years of his life.

References

Barthes, R. (2011 [1980]). *The Preparation of the Novel*. Trans. by Kate Briggs. New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, J. (1988 [1985]). *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. C. McDonald (eds.). Trans. by P. Kamul. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Elsaesser, T. (1989) *New German Cinema: A History*. London: Macmillan.

Elsaesser, T., Piotrowska A. (2019). 'Lovers in Time: An Essay Film of Contested Memories;' in: B. Hollweg, I. Kristic (eds.) *World Cinema and the Essay Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Haraway, D. (1988). 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', in: "Feminist Studies", Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn) pp. 575–99.

Haraway, D. (2004). *The Haraway Reader*. London & New York: Routledge.

Haraway, D. (2004). *Second Millennium. Feminism and Technoscience*. London, New York: Routledge.

Haraway, D., Schneider, J. (2005). 'Conversations with Donna Haraway', in: J. Schneider, D. Haraway (eds.) *Live Theory*. London/New York: Continuum.

Rich, A. (1986). *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. London: Virago.

Rich, A. (1979). *On Lies, Secrets and Silence; Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. London: Norton.

Rughani, P. (2013). 'The Dance of Documentary Ethics', in: *The Documentary Film Book*, B. Winston. (ed.) London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan.

Silverman, K. (1988). *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.