

Mirostaw Przyłipiak

University of Gdansk

Thomas Elsaesser and Film Studies¹

“Give chance a chance”

On March 6th, 2008 in Philadelphia, Thomas Elsaesser received the annual award of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) for outstanding scholarly achievement (Distinguished Career Achievement Award). His thank you speech for this occasion was a reflection on his professional journey, significantly entitled “Stepping sideways”, as this was also the year of his mandatory retirement, when he was “stepping down” from his Chair at the University of Amsterdam. He characterised his academic career as a series not of career-steps or mis-steps, but of sideways steps, often based on misunderstandings, “mostly productive ones, to be sure, but (in true melodramatic and parapractic fashion) out of sync, too soon, too late, the right thing at the wrong place, or vice versa” (Elsaesser, 2009C, p. 121).

Saying this, he did not allude to the misunderstandings related to his origins and nationality, which had puzzled quite a few, with the result that the Dutch took him for an Englishman, the Germans for a Dutchman, and only the Americans let him be from “Europe”. Speaking about “productive misunderstandings” (which is intriguingly reminiscent of the “productive pathologies”, a term that he coined and promoted), he meant more serious events. He was referring to his breakthrough as a young film scholar and to the importance

¹ This paper is an abbreviated and updated version of a foreword to Thomas Elsaesser’s book *Kino – maszyna myślenia. Refleksje nad kinem epoki cyfrowej*, (2018). Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego.

for his career of an essay he wrote on melodrama, published for the first time in an almost unknown magazine called “Monogram”, but later reprinted many times and translated into several languages (Elsaesser, 1972). It was supposed to contribute “to the issue of ‘authorship’ and ‘genre’ as it was discussed at that time [...], but it returned to me in 1975 as a ‘significant’ article for feminist film theory. What to do? Disavow it? Not the best solution. When I look back I see that I have made misunderstandings my method of life, or put in other words, I practised a politics and a poetics of bungled actions (parapraxes), not so much in the sense of Freudian slips, but in the sense of a faith in happy accidents and a trust in fortunate mistakes” (2009C, p. 122).

Another such misunderstanding was an invitation to teach at the University of Iowa in 1977. Convinced that the Film Department was inviting him as a recognised expert on Classical and New Hollywood, he found that at least equally important was his nationality (they somehow established it as being “German”, even though he had left Germany some 15 years earlier). “You can imagine my punctured ambition” – he wrote – “when I found myself teaching German cinema, including Expressionism (which I knew almost nothing about) and the “New German Cinema” about which I knew only slightly more, mainly because I had translated a few years earlier Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s essay on Douglas Sirk” (p. 122).

The misunderstanding, however, turned out to be truly productive because having to get to know German cinema led to the long-range effect of a whole series of extremely important books and articles being produced that changed the image of German cinema for a generation. In his “thank you” speech Elsaesser mentions a few more cases like this, and every time an effect of chance, misunderstanding, or coincidence leads to significant scholarly achievements. “My career”, he says, “is probably nothing but one extended parapraxis, following the crab-like logic of a creature moving sideways along the beach, but once in a while being lifted up by a sudden wave, carried a bit further along the shore and then dropped down again”. While older people usually advise the young not to repeat the same mistakes, Elsaesser recommends the opposite. “You can do quite well, it seems, by repeating your mistakes, provided you persist with them long enough: the liberating effect of metonymy, as Roland Barthes might have said. Or, to misappropriate a slogan popularised by Yoko Ono and John Lennon during their ‘lie-in’ peace-session in Amsterdam in March 1969: ‘All that I’m saying: give chance a chance’” (p. 122–123).

I am quoting extracts of this speech not only because it is quite funny and a good example of an academic taking ironic distance from his own self-

importance. The more pertinent reason is the unexpected convergence of Elsaesser's look at himself and his vision of cinema. Sensitive to the absurdity of reality, he puts the emphasis on the liberating power of contingency, of internal contradictions, and of "productive pathology" as the constitutive features of contemporary cinema.

In the Service of the Academy

However, it is clearly no accident that Elsaesser was honoured in 2008 by the Society for Film and Media Studies. He belongs undoubtedly among the most outstanding representatives of contemporary film studies. Thoroughly educated (University of Heidelberg, Paris Sorbonne, University of Sussex, where in 1971 he defended his doctorate in comparative literature), he begins writing about movies in the mid-sixties. His first articles, published in student film magazines, such as "Sussex Outlook" and "Brighton Film Review" (which he founded at the University of Sussex), are mainly devoted to profiles of European (Jean-Luc Godard [1965], Luis Buñuel [1966], Jean Renoir [1969A]) and American (King Vidor [1969], Vincente Minnelli [1969B; 1970], Nicholas Ray [1970B]) directors-auteurs. His career in film studies accelerates around the mid-seventies, after the publication of the article mentioned above about melodrama, which is, moreover, the second part of what he calls a "trilogy" of articles (Elsaesser, 1971, 1972, 1975) expressing "faith in Hollywood at a time when it was difficult to hear a good word being said about Hollywood" (Elsaesser, 2009, p. 122). Forty years later his rich and extraordinary varied scholarly output include fifteen monographs, ten edited and co-edited volumes, and about three hundred articles and chapters, published in collective volumes and the most prestigious periodicals around the world. His publications have been translated into nearly twenty languages, including Chinese, Hungarian, Spanish, Turkish and Polish.

One of the leading topics in Elsaesser's academic output is undoubtedly German cinema, already briefly mentioned. Among the numerous publications dedicated to the subject, the ones that stand out the most are:

- his first book, *New German Cinema A History* (1989), devoted to an extremely important current of West German cinema (the book was written when Germany was still divided into East and West), initiated by the Oberhausen Manifesto in 1962, from which emerged such auteurs as Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, Werner Herzog, Rainer Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, Margarethe von Trotta, Peter Handke amongst others;

- *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (2000), challenging many commonly held views on perhaps the best-known period in the history of German cinema, including Expressionist film;
- *German Cinema – Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory Since 1945* (2013), which tracks the impact of the Nazi era and the Holocaust on German cinema after the Second World War.

To these one needs to add the outstanding monograph on Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1996) and the volume on Harun Farocki (2004), as well as several other books and scores of articles about the various epochs, phenomena and aspects of German cinema (e.g. 1999, 2001, 2002).

Another important area of Elsaesser's interest was classical American cinema, and especially the continuities and transformations of Hollywood cinema in recent decades, captured from a broad cultural perspective. His main books devoted to Hollywood are *Studying Contemporary American Film* (co-written with Warren Buckland, 2002B), *Hollywood Heute: Geschichte, Gender und Nation* (2009B) and *The Persistence of Hollywood* (2011).

Elsaesser focuses on contemporary American cinema – sometimes called post-classical cinema – by describing and analysing the changes that set it apart from classical cinema, showing how Hollywood responds to the challenges posed by new technologies (digitisation), by new reception habits (collective and individual viewing, the possibility of multiple viewing, (inter)active forms of participation in film culture), by a new (global) film geography that requires its active presence in numerous competitive markets. The title of the last of these books, *The Persistence of Hollywood*, says much about the author's attitude, emphasising duration and endurance, along with change, showing how Hollywood excels at combining elements of continuity and tradition with continuous innovation: a result of engaging with whatever reality may bring. At the same time Hollywood cinema remains one of the reference points that can illuminate phenomena not belonging to Hollywood cinema itself, and even perceived as oppositional. A good example is his book *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (2005), as well as its follow-up or sequel: *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (2018).

Thomas Elsaesser was also a consummate theorist of cinema. One manifestation is the book *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2010) written together with his former student, Malte Hagener. The starting point was a series of lectures delivered by Elsaesser in 2005-2006 at the University of Amsterdam and subsequently at Yale University, so one might expect the posi-

tions taken to be purely utilitarian, an introduction to the history of thought about film, of which there are many. However, the result is quite different, determined by a most original compositional idea, about which the author himself, in a somewhat ironic and self-deprecating tone, said that it was meant to be lectures for young people about something young people are usually not very interested in, namely the theory of cinema. When wondering how to interest the students, it occurred to him to look at the theory of cinema through the prism of the body, because the body is what young people are most interested in. And suddenly, it turned out to be an excellent metaphor, perfectly accommodating much of the history of film theory, and ordering it in a more intuitive way.

Elsaesser and Hagener thus avoid a purely historical argument. Nor do they refer chronologically to the successive stages in the development of film thought (the usual approach for books of this type). Rather, they gave their book a problem to solve, by showing that film theory is a form of reflection on different variants of the relationship between humans and the world: a relationship based on distance (cinema as a window and frame); on reflection (cinema as a mirror), on crossing borders and thresholds (cinema as a door), direct contact (cinema as skin and touch), receiving stimuli (cinema as an eye, cinema as an ear) and internalisation (cinema as a brain and mind).

Although Elsaesser is a conscientious theoretician of cinema, he is not a typical theorist. First of all, in his reflections he rarely focuses merely on cinema. He prefers to perceive films within a broader context, be it of theory, of philosophy, or most recently, as part of what he calls media archaeology. The title of one recently published book is programmatic: *Film History as Media Archaeology* (2016). This is one of several items in his bibliography devoted to media theory, along with, for example, co-edited books, such as *Writing for the Medium: Television in Transition* (2004B) or also *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable?* (1998). The intriguing title of this last item suggests a thought that is also evoked in *Film History as Media Archaeology*: that the emergence of cinema may have been an (un)fortunate accident, because in reality the developed world in the 1890s was waiting for media and image technologies based on the telephone and telegraph (television, the mobile phone). Cinema – invented at the beginning of the 20th century with nineteenth-century mechanics and with storytelling techniques also from nineteenth-century literature – may be said to have “delayed” the advent of television by several dozen years. Such counterfactual reasoning is not unusual for Elsaesser, who also in other respects is not a typical theoretician of cinema, because he is guided less

by classical film-theoretical and philosophical considerations, and tends to use the theories and histories of cinema more as tools for answering wider questions concerning, besides philosophy and cultural theory, anthropology and art history. For this reason, the division of Elsaesser's output suggested above into various thematic areas is to some extent illusory, because his writing, not always easy to read due to the huge baggage of erudition, freely combines historical inquiry, interpretative hermeneutics and theoretical speculations, treating the factual base as a starting point for generalisations.

Although the scholarly output of Elsaesser measured by the number and quality of publications is impressive in itself, it is a manifestation of only one type of activity that this scholar pursues. Another is his organisational activity, expressed through initiatives that have had a lasting impact on the development of research into film and audio-visual culture. Thus, in 1976 he initiated at the University of East Anglia in Norwich the first film studies department in Great Britain, offering a full range of Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes. In the early nineties he moved to Amsterdam and there, just as in England, he founded – also the first in the Netherlands – the Department of Film and Television Studies (later renamed Department of Media and Culture). He also initiated the prestigious book series “Film Culture in Transition” published by Amsterdam University Press, for which he was the General Editor and oversaw the publication of sixty volumes. He also coordinated several large research programmes in cooperation with the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, of which he was one of the five founders. He is a member of the Advisory Board of several academic journals, and has participated in transnational research programmes conducted in England, Italy, Denmark, Portugal and Germany.

Thomas Elsaesser also conducted lively pedagogic activity. The list of universities where he taught as a visiting professor is long. There are a number of American universities (Yale, Columbia, New York University, University of Iowa and the different campuses of the University of California) and European ones (Bergen, Stockholm, Cambridge, Vienna, Ferrara, Hamburg, Berlin), as well as Tel Aviv and Brisbane. He also supervised the theses of about thirty-five doctoral students, many of whom went on to become themselves outstanding film and media experts. Among them are leading researchers of contemporary audiovisual culture, working in many countries on different continents, such as Ginette Vincendeau, Professor at King's College London, Ravi Vasudevan from the Sarai Centre in New Delhi, Michael Wedel, Professor at the Film University Potsdam-Babelsberg, Malte Hagener, Professor at the University in Marburg, Patricia Pisters, Professor at the University of Amsterdam, Eleftheria Thanouli, Professor at

the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Then there is Warren Buckland from Oxford Brookes University, Mehliş Behlil from Kadir Has University in Istanbul, Marijke de Valck from the University of Utrecht, Tarja Laine at the University of Amsterdam, and Seung-hoon Jeong from New York University in Abu Dhabi. All these scholars have made significant contributions in the world of film studies both as authors and teachers. In recent years, in spite of his retirement, Thomas Elsaesser led a very intense – too intense, perhaps – academic life, as a most desired keynote speaker at academic conferences around the world. It is during such a lecturing tour in China that he passed away.

After years of researching different film cultures and teaching about cinema and the arts, in 2017 Thomas Elsaesser stood behind the camera and made his own movie, a personal documentary entitled *The Sun Island*. The starting point was home movies from the 1940s, made with an amateur standard eight camera by his father and documenting the life of the Elsaesser family – and notably his grandfather, the architect Martin Elsaesser – at the summer house on an island near Berlin between the mid-1930 and the mid-1940s. In the voice over commentary, spoken by the author, the suggestion is made that it was these family films that might have been the reason why Elsaesser took up cinema studies professionally. Be this as it may, *The Sun Island* presents a very interesting family saga, showing Germany during these momentous years from an unknown perspective – the war, fascism, politics are the outer horizon, but what we see is the ordinary everyday life of a not quite ordinary family.

To the list of universities where Thomas Elsaesser taught can be added the University of Gdańsk. He was a visiting professor there in the winter semester of the academic year 2017/2018, teaching two courses: one on the general theory of cinema for undergraduate and graduate students (based on the Polish translation of *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*, 2015) and the other a seminar on European Cinema and Continental Philosophy for PhD students. He usually came to Gdańsk from Berlin, where he was Senior Fellow at the *Cinepoetics* research initiative at the Free University.

Caring about the precision of his argument, Elsaesser preferred to read from specially prepared texts, or to offer contextualising commentary on passages from his publications, as well as from chapters he was currently working on. The – illustrated – lectures were always open for interventions by the listeners, giving rise to lively discussions, especially in the advanced classes. During these PhD seminars in Gdansk the idea of translating into Polish some of Elsaesser's essays on mind-game films and some other aspects of contemporary cinema, putting them together and publishing them as a separate volume.

Thomas selected the essays and the seminar participants translated them. The official launch of the book was at the beginning of October 2018 during the conference “Psychoanalysis in Our Time. Psychoanalysis, Nationalism and Ideology”. Thomas was very happy with the book and he planned to publish it in English too.

Mind-Game Films

A trend bearing many names, out of which “puzzle films” is probably the most popular, has stirred perhaps the hottest debate in film studies of recent years. This debate was not limited to the circles of academic film studies, it attracted commentators from many other areas, be they philosophers, physicists, film fans and aficionados, or many others. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that this trend also attracted Elsaesser, who even reserved his own, carefully chosen name for it: *mind-game films*. Out of the many papers in which this issue was tackled more or less directly, two seem to be especially pertinent: *The Mind-Game Films* (2009) and *Contingency, Causality, Complexity: Distributed Agency in The Mind-Game Film* (2018B). These two essays bracket a decade of their author’s very intense research on the subject and they testify to the evolution of his thinking. The lecture on these two essays is, by the way, a fascinating experience in methodology and history of ideas, but Elsaesser did not stop there. Recently he worked on yet another paper on mind-game films (*Mind-game Films as at the Tipping Point*), an extract of which we publish in this issue.

The first of the abovementioned essays is probably Elsaesser’s earliest attempt at touching on the subject, and it has the character of a symptom and a social allegory, in spirit close to Elsaesser’s general debt to Walter Benjamin. Mind-game films are treated as *signum temporis*. Elsaesser puts forward his thesis that two basic representational systems have dominated Western thinking: the visual-mimetic, underlying easel painting, and then photography and film, and the verbal-symbolic, personified by printing and the book. These allowed Europe to “make great strides at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries”, but they may have “exhausted their capabilities of modelling and representing the modern world”. Similarly, the narrative form – the bourgeois novel – that has dominated for the past two centuries still has its advantages, but “it also has a number of limitations”: there are many new tasks of organising information in an intuitive order for which narrative may not provide the right tools” (2009, p. 23). It is quite possible, says Elsaesser, that we live in a period of another epistemic shift:

“[...] the turn of the 20th and 21st century will be seen as a similar moment [as that between 1470 and 1520], an epochal turn in the field of representational systems, this time entwined around the computer, mobile telephone and digitalisation. Even if the implications – the philosophical and political consequences – of this turn are not yet as clear as those from the Renaissance or the Enlightenment period, it’s safe to say that there was a constant perspective that made painting (and cinema) a kind “Windows to the world” competes with many screens / monitors / interfaces (with virtual windows characteristic of them, refreshed images, built-in links, as well as various types of graphics, tomography and visualisation) and that the book in which the written text becomes variable and searchable, and also dynamically linked with images, diagrams or graphics, is also in a phase of transformation. As a consequence, the story (as traditionally the most effective form of combining different information) must compete with the archive and database, and their forms of organisation and contact with the user” (2009, p. 24).

Mind-game films would in this perspective be transitional forms: they are still narrative (and even classically narrative in some of their features), but they also complicate the time-space coordinates of traditional narrative to such an extent that they are also leaving linear narrative behind.

In the second text on the subject of mind-game films Elsaesser characterises his earlier approach as perhaps too sociological, in the sense of mainly explaining the appearance of mind-game films owing to economic, technological and demographic reasons. Since similar films have already appeared before, especially in the so-called modernist trend of European art cinema, the genealogy according to which mind-game films are a reaction to external changes may be too simple an argument. It seems more accurate to also point to some age-old philosophical questions, which traditionally concern issues such as: the reality of other minds, the nature perception and human consciousness, and the different reality status and types of reference of the simulacrum, the copy and the fake.

In his new article, Elsaesser does not so much give up the sociological perspective as add another dimension: “The task in this essay [...] is to complement my earlier symptomatic, sociological and economic reading of mind-game films with a reassessment of their status [...] from a philosophical perspective” (2018B, p. 14). It seems, however, that in Elsaesser’s writing, on this subject at least, both these points of view – symptomatic and philosophical – are constantly present. Where they seem to clash, the overarching role of the approach which – for the sake of simplicity I called sociological – remains intact, even

as it demands development and requires further refinement. Elsaesser's methodological position is not easy to capture with labels, because it defies explicit classifications. It is neither a declared cognitivist, nor a psycho-semiotic approach, but neither does it subscribe to phenomenology; it neither belongs to postmodernism nor to gender-and-identity studies, although probably several of these orientations are close to him. If he draws from each, he fully identifies with none of them, displaying a great ability to use findings from the various schools of contemporary thought, without falling into methodological contradictions and inconsistencies. Characteristic in this respect is a declaration that one finds in one of his essays ("Too late, too soon: body, time and agency"), in which he suggests the possibility of reconciling the thought of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault with Deleuze and cognitivism, insofar as the former two understand 'soft' or discursive power as formatting the senses, and the latter two both reject psychoanalysis (2005B).

If I had to characterise Elsaesser intellectually, I would say that his writings are distant derivatives of Karl Marx's theses about the base defining the superstructure, reformulated in the spirit of Benjamin, with more weight given to culture yet spiced with a pinch of Marshall McLuhan's technological determinism, although he rarely if ever cites the latter, choosing instead to name Friedrich Kittler as a source of inspiration.

If we chance a simplification, we could say that with this approach, works of art – or more neutrally 'cultural texts' – reflect in their own structure the changes that are taking place in the "productive forces", defined as comprising the social structure, as well as the "means of production", including technology. Speaking generally, Elsaesser tries to explore how the changes in technological developments affect cinema at the level of form and structure, and not (merely) of content. Since one of the dimensions of this change is temporal reversibility and a greater complexity in cause and effect relations (both typical to mind-game films), cinema is not merely a reflection of these changes, but also part of their cause and their concrete embodiment.

It is thus at the level of structure that general considerations arise. Elsaesser is tackling the philosophical issues just named – the reality of other minds, the nature of perception and humanity's consciousness, as well as time or causality – not in an abstract way, through logical analysis, but by embedding these concepts in a specific historical, social and cultural situation. He does not reflect on the reality of other minds or the nature of perception per se, but examines how such minds are portrayed in certain films and what this may tell us about our world and our times.

Agency

As is clear from the above, Elsaesser writes about many different things, combining various orientations and points of view within an overall coherent statement. Let us also acknowledge that he writes about very different films, always in an engaging way and without value judgement or prejudice: whether a megahit such as *Avatar* (2011B), or an esoteric oddity like David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2014), whether Steven Spielberg's adaptation of a Philip K. Dick story such as *Minority Report* (2014B) or a politically controversial film like Katherine Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2016B), in addition to numerous mind-game films, melodramas as well as classics of modernist film. The focus is not only on movies: at least equally important are the broader contexts, such as the director's place in film culture or the image- and brand-name politics of film studios, which shows the impact of the so-called "new film history", with which Elsaesser is sometimes identified (Hendrykowski, 2015; Elsaesser, 2009B).

Although Elsaesser combines with great ease a variety of topics, points of view and methods, one can, in my opinion, nonetheless pick out the leading issue, indicated by the frequency of the word "agency", which can be variously understood as "efficacy", sometimes as "driving power", and sometimes as "action". Broadly speaking, agency names the instance that has decisive influence on the course of events and the shape of affairs both inside films, within the fictional worlds presented, and outside, within film culture at large. According to Elsaesser, we can observe some fundamental changes in the way agency functions: emanating not from a single source (the protagonist, and/or antagonist), but "distributed" across several instances, both embodied and structural, both visible and invisible, both operating at the micro-level and the macro-level. Contemporary cinema – and especially mind-game films – on the one hand documents these transformations by drawing attention to them, while on the other hand it promotes forms of agency and introduces protagonists that have adapted to and can cope with the new conditions.

Again, at the risk of a certain simplification (but I hope with the benefit of clarifying the argument), one can present the following summary: typical for classical cinema was the essential unity in the functioning of agency. Within the world represented, the course of events was the result of the will of the main character(s), not for nothing called "hero(es)". Ideally, the hero eventually realised his intentions and achieved his goals, in spite of obstacles and by overcoming his opponents. In more complex situations, the hero's goals could not be fully carried out, since in the course of events and as a result of the clash of various protagonists, these goals underwent a transformation. But even in

such cases, it was possible to identify the locus of agency, to name it, and to enumerate the factors and forces at play. As a consequence, classical cinema was perhaps an unintentional but powerful propaganda tool for the ideology of individualism, and in a sense, this also linked it to the ideology of humanism. Not coincidentally, the centre of almost every frame in classical narrative, regardless of the film's genre, is occupied by an active human figure.

It would be hard to find a more emphatic visual symbol for “having dominion over the earth” than agency in classical narrative, and thus for the conviction that humanity is the centre of the world, both as a species and as embodied in the individual human being. A similar singularity of attributing agency has characterised the dominant ways of describing the functioning of film culture. Here the director-as-author (for film studies) and the producer (for the institution) were the only instances recognised as competing for top priority. Agency was attributed to the director (in art cinema) or to the producer (in commercial cinema), often with the implication that the finished product, i.e. the film, was the result of a combination of these two vectors, whether in terms of conflict, cooperation or synergy, but always with the confidence that the forces of agency can be distinguished and named. Such a division of labour signalled a clear and consistent message, already known in advance as self-expression (in the case of the director), and as ideology (in the case of a producer/studio).

This description is obviously very simplified, also with reference to classical cinema, and Elsaesser himself would probably not entirely agree with it. However, it is not our task or intention to accurately describe the functioning of classical cinema, but to sketch the background against which the transformations of contemporary cinema can become more clearly visible. The picture outlined above can also be called a linear, uni-directional, dualistic model of agency: from cause to effect, from intention to implementation, from subject to object, from observer to observed, from male to female, from man to the world. And this simple set of relationships, which reflects the mechanistic way of understanding the world, has been, according to Elsaesser, questioned as much by modern civilisation as by cinema which, being an inseparable part of the world, participates in its transformations.

“[...] our idea of autonomy – this is a single source and rational action – is complicated by mediation patterns, randomness and mutual interdependence. These “rhizomatic” tendencies are strengthened by electronic communication and the Internet, whose architecture is the place of simultaneous, multidirectional, recursive and looped interactions” (2017, p. 65).

When it comes to movie characters, “the mind-game film question is not only the ‘can-do’ posture of the action hero of classical Hollywood, but also the very notion of a ‘fully self-present’, the autonomous individual” (Elsaesser, 2018, p. 29).

One of the most notable manifestations of these changes in agency is the frequency with which the protagonists of mind-game films display symptoms of certain kinds of mental conditions or “pathologies”. Elsaesser lists four in particular: amnesia, autism, paranoia and schizophrenia. Of course, mentally ill people are by definition not fully autonomous individuals: their agency is thwarted and their relationship with the world is disturbed. It can happen that the world in which the characters function has all the hallmarks of an objectively existing world, yet may turn out to be the projection of a severely disturbed individual mind (*A Beautiful Mind*, *Spider*): a fact not only not known to the protagonist but for much of the film also unsuspected by the viewer. What is interesting, however, is that Elsaesser does not treat these pathologies as case studies, but calls them “productive” because he thinks that they are an adaptive response to new living conditions in contemporary society and – as in the case of the protagonist of *A Beautiful Mind* – are capable of making a valuable contribution to the emergence of new solutions, forging new connections, and embodying new ways of thinking and acting, made necessary by extreme conditions (such as modern warfare), by our altered ways of day-to-day living, which are often the result of technologies now deeply embedded in our environment and habits.

On the one hand – Elsaesser states – we are, thus, dealing with pathologies (of subjectivity, of consciousness, of memory and identity): indications of crisis and uncertainty in the relationship of the self with itself and with the world (and by extension: of the spectator with the screen). On the other hand, these apparently damaged minds and bodies are capable of displaying remarkable faculties at times, being in touch with agents from another world (*The Sixth Sense*), foretelling imminent disaster (*Donnie Darko*), or starting popular protest movements (*Fight Club*). Their ‘disability’ functions as empowerment, and their minds, by seemingly losing control, gain a different kind of relation to the man-made, routinised or automated surroundings, but also to the more “cosmic” energies, which usually centre on the new physics of time travel, curved spaces, stochastic systems and warps in the universe. In other words, these pathologies are presented to the spectator in some sense as *productive pathologies* (2009, p. 26).

Another dimension of the crisis of agency is visible in post-classical films as a change in the way we understand causal relationships. Formerly perceived as

the basic way of combining individual scenes and episodes, presented as obvious and natural, linear causality has lost its character of inevitability: it ceases to be a solution, and instead becomes a problem. Elsaesser devotes much space to redefining causality, which he sometimes calls “retroactive” (when something is projected backwards, before it becomes a force or a cause in the past, affecting the present), and sometimes contingent (when “contingency becomes our new causality”).

Situations, where what is classically perceived as a “result” changes its vector, as it were, and overtakes the “cause” are most commonly found in films with a time travel motif or plot premise, but also in other films where the chronology is disturbed, such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. These reversed cause-effect relationships are a manifestation of the crisis in the classic form of filmic storytelling, with films not necessarily ceasing to be narrative, but becoming “part-text, part-archive, part-point of departure, part node in a rhizomatic, expandable network of inter-tribal communication” (2009, p. 35).

The conviction that there is a crisis of agency also manifests itself in the persistence with which Elsaesser rejects the name most often used for the films that interest him – puzzle films – and instead sticks to the one coined by himself: mind-game films. To him its not just a terminological issue: the word puzzle, or “a puzzle”, suggests that the viewer’s task is to *solve* it, to find the missing piece(s), and to rearrange the elements in such a way that we end up with a neat, consistent picture. In other words: cut the corners, smooth the rough edges, and eliminate the ambiguities or contradictions.

Meanwhile, as we face a world full of multilateral dependencies and interconnections, full of complexities and truly pluralistic, where many inconsistencies in thoughts, ideas, views, and states of affairs exist in parallel and side by side, we should not strive to eliminate contradictions, ambiguities, differences, but learn to live with them. Mind-game films, as Elsaesser conceives them, rely on maintaining this constant mental tension, where the goal is not to understand the world – if we consider ‘understanding’ as accepting one simple interpretation, and eliminating all other possibilities – but to grasp it, in all its multi-faceted complexity. Mind-game films express just this philosophy, they teach this attitude, by presenting types of agency in which the relationship between opportunity and contingency, between stochastic systems and predetermination takes the place of free will, individual decision and rational choice. They now manifest themselves as “distributed agency”, often in the form of networks that function not so much by way of cooperation and collaboration, but rather of conflicted relations, which nonetheless achieve “results” because they are tied into a dynamic of “antagonistic reciprocity”.

The consequence of accepting such an optics is Elsaesser's penchant for collecting paradoxes and contradictions. This is particularly noticeable in his text on David Lynch (2014). The American director is featured there through the prism of a performative self-contradiction, which arises "when one makes a claim that contradicts the validity of the *means* that are used to make it, i.e. which contradicts your *performance* of the claim" (2014, p. 50–51). The category of self-contradiction allows Elsaesser to highlight various contradictions in Lynch, such as defining him as a director who functions both inside and outside of Hollywood, who while being an *auteur* (admired as such by the French and the Cannes Film Festival) is also a part of the American film industry, who strives after authenticity but is also the creator of virtual realities, who is a pioneer in making programmes for television but is also its severest critic, who has nothing but contempt for people watching films on mobile phones, and shows this in an advertisement for the Apple iPhone. The rules of the excluded middle do not apply in Elsaesser's thinking, and what prevails is a belief in the need to learn to live in the midst of contradictions and antagonisms.

This applies not only to the directorial persona (besides Lynch, Elsaesser makes similar cases for James Cameron [2011B] and Michael Haneke [2010]), but also for the functioning of the film industry as a whole. Rejecting a priori the concept of a unified, coherent message, planned by a central authorial instance (be it the producer or the director), Elsaesser shows how the movies of modern Hollywood, wanting to reach the largest possible audiences of diverse background, faiths and group identity ("access for all"), deliberately incorporate a level of ideological incoherence ("structured ambiguity"), thanks to which various groups of viewers, who in real life not only have little in common, but are sometimes even antagonistic to each other, can nonetheless identify with Hollywood movies and treat them as if they spoke for them. By a typical Elsaesser paradox, the sender (i.e. Hollywood) would therefore be exercising control by getting rid of it, at least in part, or put it differently, by means of a skilful management of multiple – foreign and/or conflicting – points of view.

By elaborating his argument about Hollywood balancing "access for all" with "keeping control by giving it up", Elsaesser hints that he is updating an old formula, once proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss for the study of myths: that these are best understood as "imaginary solutions to real contradictions". This formula, also used by Rick Altman (1984), when he treated film genres as a modern form of myths, meant that the contradictions for which in real social life there is no solution, can be tamed, relaxed, and even reconciled by means of narrative conventions and generic features. While Altman attributed

such a function to classic Hollywood movies, mind-game movies, according to Elsaesser, subvert this formula. It may even be their greatest achievement, more important than narratological issues, such as narrative complexities or looping. Instead of offering “imaginary solutions” they emphasise “real contradictions”. Every impasse in the mind-game films – Elsaesser says – “can be understood as an indication of some real contradictions – be it in the capitalist system, in the organisation of society, or in the human condition – for which we have no solution, neither imagined nor real“ (2018, p. 26). So it is not about eliminating contradictions or solving them through substitution, but about learning to live with them, because they are an indispensable and integral part of the modern world.

Slips, happy accidents, fortunate mistakes

At the same time, when speaking as a philosopher of cinema, Elsaesser does not think of films as a source of knowledge about reality, but potentially as a reality in their own right: “[...] cinema, or more generally, the photographic image, is the reality of the twentieth century, whether we like it or not. ‘The lie of the image is the truth of our world,’ as Jean Luc Nancy so pithily put it. As a consequence, we tend to treat [...] “the cinema,” as if it was the West’s (or our modernity’s) only anthropology that still matters, turning film studies into the reassuring murmur of ubiquitous auto-ethnography, academia’s equivalent to data mining” (2009C, pp. 125–126). Yet Elsaesser draws not only intellectual benefits, but also purely sensual pleasure from contact with different types of audio-visual performances. This, too, he spoke about in his thank-you speech, from which I quoted at the beginning:

There is surely also another side to cinema: the terrors and pleasures of a way of “being in the world” not dependent on my subjectivity, which Andre Bazin was the first to insist on, relieving me of the burden of self-consciousness, of existential guilt, or simply of my body, for the space of two hours, releasing me from the need to make sense of my life and the obligation to shape it into a work of authenticity, of truth and relentless self-improvement.

[...] Because of its somewhat “performative” position in the academy, hovering over several disciplines, such as literature, art history, philosophy, gender studies, and a host of others, film studies is comparable to a bumblebee (feeding off, but also pollinating its hosts), and it can permit itself (if it wants to, if it’s bold enough) to be experimental, curious, adventurous, and even irresponsible: in short, opportunistic, meaning that it can seize opportunities when they present themselves, and “parapractic,” meaning it can afford slippages, happy accidents, and fortunate mistakes. This, as I have been trying to suggest,

is how I have known film studies, this is how I have practiced it, and this is how I would like to remember it" (2009C, p. 126).

References

- Altman, R. (1984). *A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre*. "Cinema Journal" Vol. 23, No3.
- Elsaesser, T. (1965). *Jean Luc Godard*, "Sussex Outlook". No. 4 (November).
- Elsaesser, T. (1966). *Luis Buñuel*, "Sussex Outlook". No. 7 (February).
- Elsaesser, T. (1969). *King Vidor*, "Brighton Film Review". No. 7 (April).
- Elsaesser, T. (1969A). *Jean Renoir*, "Brighton Film Review". No. 9 (June).
- Elsaesser, T. (1969B). *Vincente Minelli*, "Brighton Film Review", No. 15.
- Elsaesser, T. (1970). *Vincente Minelli 2*, "Brighton Film Review". No. 18.
- Elsaesser, T. (1970B). *Nicholas Ray*, "Brighton Film Review". No. 19 (April), No. 20 (May).
- Elsaesser, T. (1971). *Why Hollywood?*. "Monogram". No. 1.
- Elsaesser, T. (1972). *Tales of Sound and Fury: The Family Melodrama*. "Monogram", No. 4.
- Elsaesser, T. (1975). *The Pathos of Failure: The Unmotivated Hero*. "Monogram", No. 6.
- Gledhill, Ch. (1987). *Home Is Where the Heart Is. Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. London: British Film Institute.
- Elsaesser, T. (1989). *New German Cinema: A History*. Basingstoke: Macmillan and Rutgers University Press.
- Elsaesser, T. (1996). *Fassbinder's Germany: History Identity Subject*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Elsaesser, T., Hoffmann K. (1998). *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable?*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Elsaesser, T. ed. (1999), *The BFI Companion to German Cinema*. London: British Film Institute.
- Elsaesser, T. (2000). *Weimar Cinema and After*. London: Routledge.
- Elsaesser, T. (2001). *Metropolis*. London: British Film Institute.
- Elsaesser, T. (hrsg) (2002). *Kino der Kaiserzeit*. München.
- Elsaesser, T. , Buckland, W. (2002B). *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Elsaesser, T. ed. (2004). *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-lines*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

- Elsaesser, T. Simons, J. eds. (2004B). *Writing for the Medium: Television in Transition*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Elsaesser, T. (2005). *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Elsaesser, T. (2005B). Zu spät, zu früh: Körper, Zeit und Aktionsraum in der Kino-Erfahrung, in: *Kinogefühle*, hrsg. Vn M.Thohler, Vol. Heidiger, Schüren. Marburg: Schüren.
- Elsaesser, T. (2009). The Mind-Game Films, in: W. Buckland. ed. *Puzzle Films*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Elsaesser, T. (2009A). *Nowa Historia – Conceptual Concept*. “Kwartalnik Filmowy”, No. 67–69.
- Elsaesser, T. (2009B). *Stepping Sideways. SCMS Lifetime Membership Award*. “Cinema Journal”.
- Elsaesser, T. (2009C). *Hollywood Heute: Geschichte, Gender und Nation*. Berlin: Bertz + Fischer.
- Elsaesser, T., Hagener, M. (2010). *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*. New York: Routledge.
- Elsaesser, T.(2010). Performative Self-Contradictions in Michael Haneke’s Mind Games, in: *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, (ed.) R. Grundmann. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Elsaesser, T. (2011). *The Persistence of Hollywood*, Routledge, New York.
- Elsaesser, T. (2011B). *Access for All: “Avatar” and Hollywood’s Global Public*. “New Review of Film and Television Studies, Vol. 9, Issue 3.
- Elsaesser, T. (2013). *Terror and Trauma: German Cinema after 1945*. New York: Routledge.
- Elsaesser, T., Hagener, M. (2015). *Teoria filmu: wprowadzenie przez zmysły*. przeł. K. Wojnowski, Kraków: Universitas.
- Elsaesser, T. (2014). *Actions Have Consequences: David Lynch’s LA Trilogie*. *Augenblick* 2014, H.59.
- Elsaesser, T. (2014B). Philip K. Dick, the Mind-Game Film, and Retroactive Causality, in: *Hollywood Puzzle Films*. W. Buckland ed., New York: Routledge.
- Elsaesser, T. (2016). *Film History as Media Archaeology*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Elsaesser, T. (2016B). Zero Dark Thirty, in: *Zrzablungen und Gegenzablungen: Terror und Krieg im Kino des 21. Jahrhunderts*, hrsg. von J. Schuf, M. Seel. Frankfurt: Campus.
- Elsaesser, T. (2017). Cinema and Game Spaces: Contingency as Our New Causality, in: *Clash of Realities*, G.S. Freyermuth, L. Gotto eds., transcript, Bielefeld.

Elsaesser, T. (2018). *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment*. New York/London: Bloomsbury.

Elsaesser, T. (2018B). *Contingency, Causality, Complexity: Distributed Agency in The Mind-Game Film*, "New Review of Film and Television Studies", Vol 16, Issue 1.

Hendrykowski, M. (2015). *Methodology of the New History of the Film*. "Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication", Vol. 17, No. 26.

Thomas Elsaesser provided this humorous interpretation during his lecture delivered at the University of Gdańsk on 15th October, 2017.