

Book Review

> Chris Broodryk

Lecturer, Department of Drama, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

chris.broodryk@up.ac.za

German Cinema – terror and trauma: cultural memory since 1945

Thomas Elsaesser, 2013

Routledge: ISBN-13: 978-0415709279 ISBN-10: 041570927X

The renowned and prolific Thomas Elsaesser has published extensively on film history and theory, from studies of German cinema (silent German cinema, New German Cinema, the cinema of the Weimar republic, German *auteurs*) to the operation of postmodernism as mourning work.¹ Such is the range of Elsaesser's scholarship that to refer to him as a film historian would be utterly restrictive for a film scholar who recently delivered an incisive introduction to Bela Tarr's apocalyptic masterpiece *The Turin horse* and has developed an intriguing line of thought around post-heroic narratives.² Rather, Elsaesser is a media archaeologist *par excellence*, a prolific writer on German cinema, American cinema, silent cinema and cinema technologies.

In this regard, Elsaesser is equally comfortable locating Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films in New German Cinema as he is in exploring the *auteurism* of Werner Herzog or addressing the self-aware use of 3D in James Cameron's *Avatar*. Freud, Lacan ('I continue to regard psychoanalysis as a sophisticated form of hermeneutics' (Elsaesser 2014:23)), Jameson and even Žižek are some of the names (and associated frameworks) that have come to inform his writing at times, as much as reflections on German film scholarship offered by Lotte Eisner and Siegfried Kracauer.

Elsaesser's most recent publication, *German Cinema – terror and trauma: cultural memory since 1945*, presents a culmination, refinement and affirmation of key ideas he has developed in his scholarship. Elsaesser himself describes this latest book as a third entry of a trilogy on *New German Cinema*, following *New German Cinema: a history* (1989) and *Fassbinder's Germany* (1996). As such, the book is an extension and deepening of notions introduced in his seminal *Screen essay, Postmodernism as mourning work*, as much as it presents a re-engagement with films about the

1. *Mind the screen: media concepts according to Thomas Elsaesser* (2008), edited by J Kooijman, P Pisters and W Strauven, collates and explores key ideas in Elsaesser's work on film, history and society, and includes contributions by Mieke Bal and Warren Buckland, amongst others. The book is available from Amsterdam University Press.

2. Watch Elsaesser's lecture on 'European cinema and the post-heroic narrative: Jean Luc Nancy, Claire Denis and Beau Travail' (2013) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aa49U6RRUa4> (01:16:09). He introduces *The Turin horse* (2013) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ot1ZPNLidwk> (17:14).

Holocaust and a notion that has become foundational to much of Elsaesser's theorisation about cinema: parapraxis.³ Parapraxis denotes a constructive performative occurrence, “the failure of performance” and the “performance of failure” (Elsaesser 2014:45, 46), as a way of ‘avoiding the two extremes of agency (Traumatic paralysis and terrorist action) while still marking the place – autonomy, self-determination and sovereignty – that these extremes both imply and anticipate’.⁴ The book consists of three parts. Part I, titled ‘Terror, trauma, parapraxis’, offers four chapters associated with topics of history, representation, and memory. Part II, ‘Parapractic poetics in German films and cinema’, offers critical readings of films by German *auteurs* such as Alexander Kluge and, of course, Fassbinder. The third part, titled ‘Trauma theory reconsidered’, presents a cognisance of various critiques Elsaesser anticipates and is familiar with, while also offering a clear way for Elsaesserian trauma theory to move forward.

Elsaesser weaves memory (including but not limited to perpetrator memory and cultural memory) and the burden of witnessing into the fibres of terror and trauma, which together provide a key dynamic for the functioning of parapraxis. Terror and trauma are inextricably linked when viewed ‘from the perspective of an agency in crisis – in their mutual insufficiency (which is the other side of panic and paralysis)’ (Elsaesser 2014:45). In contextualising agency, much of the book implicitly or explicitly grapples with the construction of a historical imaginary that often implies a cinematic-artistic coming to terms with, or working through, of histories, detailing attempts at a cinematic *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (mastering the past). History, writes Elsaesser (2014:43), insofar as it has been

taken in charge by media memory, has become parapractic, in that – due to its reversibility and undeadness in the media – the past is kept open for unexpected return visits and for permanent rewrites, as the special condition of its sounds and images enabling and empowering the present.

This process of rewriting and revisiting, Elsaesser (2014:43) explains, could make history the instrument and product of those in dominant power, but it does also allow for the possibility for a ‘counter-memory, capable of maintaining a dialogue across ideological and generational divides’. Elsaesser continues to contribute significantly to the politics of and in film through his emphasis on the political economy of national cinema(s) by way of the framework of failure that parapraxis provides.

In this light, it comes as no surprise that *German Cinema – terror and trauma: cultural memory since 1945* is best read in conjunction and cross-referenced with Elsaesser’s two other main titles on German cinema mentioned earlier. In addition, *German Cinema – terror and trauma* offers provocative intersections with Deleuze (particularly

3. Elsaesser, T. 2001. Postmodernism as mourning work. *Screen* 42(2):193-201 doi:10.1093/screen/42.2.193.

4. Also see Robnik, D. 2010. Running on failure: post-politics, democracy and parapraxis in Thomas Elsaesser's film theory. *Senses of Cinema*. [O]. Available at: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/running-on-failure-post-fordism-post-politics-democracy-and-parapraxis-in-thomas-elsaesser%C2%B4s-film-theory/>

illuminating the tensions between movement-image and time-image, something Elsaesser has touched on before) and Žižek's *The fright of real tears*, where the combination of the Žižekian language of film and the Elsaesserian historical imaginary can offer invigorating ways to both problematise and celebrate dominant narrative models. Elsaesser's latest publication offers fresh angles on familiar ideas – such as the utility of melodrama as a response to and way of retelling traumatic history – and is crucial reading to anyone not only interested in German cinema history or the contentiousness of historical representation, but also in discovering a provocative cinematic vocabulary that allows for a spirited and rigorous exploration of national cinema and political cinema.