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Floris Paalman reflects on the legacy of Thomas Elsaesser and discusses the importance of space and architecture to his theories of film and media.

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**F**ilm scholar Thomas Elsaesser passed away in Beijing on December 4, 2019. His death not only coincides with the end of a decade, but also marks the end of an era. Elsaesser (born in Berlin, 1943) belonged to the generation that made film studies into an academic discipline in its own right, to which he contributed with his work at the University of East Anglia and the University of Amsterdam, besides visiting professorships, among them at Columbia University. After his groundbreaking article “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama” (1972),<sup>1</sup> innumerable publications would follow, including studies on early cinema, Weimar cinema, New German cinema, trauma, Hollywood, European cinema, media archaeology, film philosophy, and the mind

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game film. His prolific work has played a major role in the discourses on cinema. Moreover, Elsaesser was able to draw connections to other fields. While his work firmly embedded cinema in the larger academic landscape, it also put cinema into perspective. Elsaesser's work on the intersection between cinema and the spatial disciplines is particularly insightful, from narrative tropes that structure films, such as the metaphor of the *mise-en-abyme*, to the global cities and networks in which cinema exists. Elsaesser's work shows a complex, fractal-like spatial ontology of cinema. Between the diegetic and extra-diegetic spaces of cinema, and between the different scales from which to observe cinema, Elsaesser opened up new spaces. At the core of his thinking, one may find the empty centre that enables metaphysical concepts to emerge.

### Oppositions: between time(s) and space(s)

In 2000, Elsaesser wrote his book on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), positioning the film as follows: "Generally recognised as the fetish-image of all city and cyborg futures, the once dystopian *Metropolis* now speaks of vitality and the body electric, fusing human and machine energy, its sleek figures animated more by high-voltage fluorescence than Expressionism's dark demonic figures."<sup>2</sup> This sentence not only exemplifies Elsaesser's own energetic and witty writing style, but also his trade mark: the oxymoron.<sup>3</sup> From opposed perspectives to inherent contradictions, Elsaesser laid bare conflicting aspects and even impossibilities. In this way he created an interstice, which allowed for a new vantage point to be taken. This applies to different scales, from particular films to the world of cinema at large, and from particular architectural features to geopolitics.

Elsaesser moved easily between such scales, which becomes clear from his book *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (2005). Refraining from essentialism, which seeks closure, Elsaesser aimed for the opposite, to open up established ideas such as the binary opposition between European art cinema and Hollywood's commercial entertainment. Instead, there are all kinds of cross-connections, due to international co-productions and global distribution. Whereas the notion of national cinema has dominated thinking about cinema in Europe, Elsaesser nuanced the idea of the

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nation state. Elsaesser addressed the role of cities, as centres of film production and consumption, and as hubs where people with different nationalities live together, creating networks across national borders. Moreover, Elsaesser pointed to the complex dynamics of production in connection to stylistic as well as ideological purport as a result of specific modes of practice, which require other explanations than models based on national cinema and opposing economic superpowers. Instead, he stressed co-existence, exchange and 'mutual-interference', the latter being another stake of his conceptual apparatus.<sup>4</sup>

## **Dialectics of cinematic environments**

From a single film showing one imaginary city, to the entire world of cinema with its real industries, bridging continents, Elsaesser considered social-political factors and how they are embedded in actual environments and supported by physical structures. To mark this spatial dimension, Elsaesser made the distinction between what he called *Tatort* (where the action takes place) and *Standort* (where the action is being organized), after the famous German police series *Tatort*.<sup>5</sup> It allows for an analysis of both textual and contextual elements. Moving beyond what film shows, Elsaesser conceptualized what it does, in order to understand its position in the world.

In the book *Film Theory: An Introduction*, which Elsaesser wrote together with Malte Hagener, he replaced the familiar metaphor of film as 'window on the world' by film as a door to enter the world, to engage with the world.<sup>6</sup> This metaphor, in itself architectural, invites an investigation of cinema's spatial dimension and coordinates. With reference to André Bazin's key question 'what is cinema?', Elsaesser therefore asked the question, 'where is cinema?', as another step toward answering the question 'why cinema?' (inspired by Walter Benjamin, for the way he considered cinema as means to cope with modernity<sup>7</sup>). The questions of 'where' and 'why' are especially present in Elsaesser's book *Film History as Media Archaeology* (2016). Locating cinema brought him to different cinematic genealogies, including non-theatrical practices, and looking for purposes (as a Foucauldian effort) made him draw various cross-connections between cinema and other practices.

In his study on *Das Neue Frankfurt*, with Frankfurt being a model city of Weimar Germany, Elsaesser paid attention to film as part of a campaign to promote the ideas of modern architecture and city planning, next to other media. In order to understand their strategic use and interrelations, through medium-specific differences, Elsaesser coined the concept of *Medienverbund*.<sup>8</sup> It is a concept to examine various connections between the arts, industry and politics, in order to understand how different ‘actors’ were empowered and how alliances were forged for different occasions, sometimes uniting seemingly opposed forces. As an elaboration of this approach, Elsaesser coined his triple A model: *Anlass*, *Auftraggeber*, *Anwendung*: respectively, the *reason* why a film is made, its *commissioner*, and its *use*. Searching for these three concerns results in drawing networks that allow one to locate cinema, how it is part of an environment, and what it does.

Throughout Elsaesser’s work, but especially in his later writings, one can observe a text-context continuum, in which the physicality of the medium is the bridging factor. This implies that diegetic places correspond to and have impact on actual places, although not always in direct ways. Elsaesser elaborated on it through network and system theory, in which the environment plays a crucial role. Partly building on the work of Niklas Luhmann and Bruno Latour, but also informed by Michel Foucault,<sup>9</sup> Elsaesser appropriated different paradigms to create his own line of thinking. For him, systems are epistemic structures in which opposed interests and movements co-exist, resulting in what Elsaesser called ‘antagonistic mutuality’.<sup>10</sup> As a fundamental of dialectical thinking, the system – which could be a single city as well as the global film industry – develops through gradually emerging common attractors, although they may not be visible or known to its constituents.

### **Absent cinema and the void**

The question of ‘why cinema?’ – which concerns both medium-specific qualities and social functions – can only be answered when cinema is positioned within culture and society at large. To do so, Elsaesser moved beyond the film canon, searching for ‘losers’ that could reveal dominant principles and interests. Elsaesser also advocated examining occasions where cinema was absent: where

films do not exist, where one would actually expect them. While for many scholars it might be impossible to think of a research when the object of investigation is not there, Elsaesser approached such occasions as opportunities to better understand the conditions and reasons for cinema to exist. By addressing absence, Elsaesser drew an antipode to what we take for granted, and as such a conceptual space in between two poles. This is exemplified by a study he conducted on the architectural postcard, which was a stand-in for often absent architectural films around 1930.<sup>11</sup> While many of the modern architects were cinephiles, one would expect many of their buildings to feature in various kinds of films, but instead, as Elsaesser made clear, the photographic postcard was the preferred medium. It enabled architects, including the so-called functionalists, to present a particular view and composition of their buildings, as sculptures seen from specific angles, rather than showing functions and uses. Cinema, by comparison, becomes too quickly an unruly medium showing multiple perspectives and ways people inhabit space. While cinema may integrate different views to get a full picture, its cinematography and montage may also cause the opposite, a certain disintegration.

Examining absence is a way to understand presence, and to put what is present in perspective. The present is never a self-evident outcome of the past, and a past could manifest itself again in the future, as the losers of yesterday might be the winners of tomorrow. This creates a rationale for an engagement with counterfactual history.<sup>12</sup> But Elsaesser was cautious to stress it as such. Rather, he was interested in 'what if?' as thought experiment,<sup>13</sup> to understand historical contingency, the unstable conditions of the past. While we tend to create a fixed picture of the past afterwards, by looking back from the perspective of the outcome, the historical moment is always characterized by uncertainty – crisis being the permanent condition of history.



*Thomas Elsaesser in front of a picture of his grandfather, Martin Elsaesser.  
Photograph by Floris Paalman.*

Absence has become a trope in Elsaesser's work, from the particular example of architectural films being absent, to the absence of cinema – as we know it – in the period before 1895.<sup>14</sup> Also politically, Elsaesser paid attention to absence, especially the absence of a central European power, next to the absence of a coherent European identity, as exemplified by European cinema. However, Elsaesser did not see this as a problem, but as an advantage. Elaborating on Alain Badiou, the 'empty centre' allows for multiple perspectives, voices, ideas, and contradictions to exist,

and as such, for dialectical development and growth.<sup>15</sup> The ‘empty centre’, as a geopolitical and spatial concept, is, after all what provides a future for European cinema. It allows for alternatives to emerge, and hence, for thought experiments, for film to visualize ‘what if’ scenarios, with no predetermined outcome (and here we see Elsaesser linking back to Walter Benjamin).

Instead of narrative closure, Elsaesser opted for sophisticated provocation. Conflicting positions would reveal more than a single perspective. Protagonists could become antagonists, and vice versa, and history could similarly turn its back on what was previously embraced. In geopolitical terms, the concept of ‘double occupancy’ is what characterizes Elsaesser’s theoretical complexity.<sup>16</sup> He coined it in the context of the Alsace/Elsass region, fought over by France and Germany, making it simultaneously centre and periphery.

It is probably speculative to say that the void, as known in architecture, was the embryonic concept for Elsaesser that allowed him to develop his (political) film philosophy. However, it is a matter of fact that in the last ten years of his career, Elsaesser was occupied with the legacy of his grandfather Martin Elsaesser, city architect of Frankfurt from 1925-1932, in which period he built his masterpiece, the Grossmarkthalle (grocery market). At that time it was heralded as a modernist achievement exactly because of its suspension, creating a void for the market to exist. It has been the planned annihilation of that monumental quality, by the construction of the European Central Bank in it, that caused Elsaesser – with other relatives – to start a legal fight with this institution, in defence of the void.<sup>17</sup> For Elsaesser, the occupation of the void by the European financial authority was a powerful sign of what Europe should not be. Instead, it should respect its history, its modern(ist) history not the least, for its ideals and possibilities, and how the empty centre allows for human(ist) interaction and discussion. While this motivated Elsaesser to make his film *The Sun Island*,<sup>18</sup> about the work and life of his grandfather, he wanted to continue this path and make more films. Although he was not able to do so, this connection shows how Elsaesser developed his own dialectics of space and time. He countered architectural digression through cinema, while spatial structures provided an ontology for his thinking about cinema.



Floris Paalman

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## Notes [-]

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- ↑1 Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama”, *Monogram* 4 (1972): 2-15.
- ↑2 Thomas Elsaesser, *Metropolis* (London: BFI, 2000), 7.
- ↑3 Thomas Elsaesser, “Pushing the Contradictions of the Digital: ‘Virtual Reality’ and ‘Interactive Narrative’ as Oxymorons between Narrative and Gaming”, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 12.3 (2014): 295-311.
- ↑4 Thomas Elsaesser, “Real Location, Fantasy Space, Performative Place: Double Occupancy and Mutual Interference in European Cinema”, in *European Film Theory*, ed. Temenuga Trifonova (New York: Routledge, 2009), 47-61.
- ↑5 First addressed by Elsaesser in a lecture for students of the Rietveld Academie, held at the Netherlands Media Art Institute in Amsterdam, 18 February 2004. See also: Thomas Elsaesser, “In the City But Not Bounded by It: Cinema in the Global City, the Generic City and the Cluster City,” in *Global Cinematic Cities: New Landscapes of Film and Media*, ed. Johan Andersson and Lawrence Webb (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2016), 19-35 [30].
- ↑6 Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (London/New York: Routledge, 2015).
- ↑7 Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam university Press, 2016), 26.
- ↑8 Thomas Elsaesser, “Die Stadt von Morgen: Filme zum Bauen

und Wohnen.” *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland* (Bd. 2: *Weimarer Republik: 1918-1933*). Ed. Klaus Kreimeier et al. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005. 381-410. [391]

- ↑9 Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam university Press, 2016).
- ↑10 Thomas Elsaesser, “Contingency, Causality, Complexity: Distributed Agency in the Mind-game Film”, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 16.1 (2018): 1-39.
- ↑11 Thomas Elsaesser, “The Architectural Postcard: Photography, Cinema, and Modernist Mass Media.” *Grey Room* 70 (2018): 80-101.
- ↑12 Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam university Press, 2016), 23n19.
- ↑13 *Film History as Media Archaeology*, 133.
- ↑14 *Film History as Media Archaeology*, 260.
- ↑15 Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (New York et al.: Bloomsbury, 2019) [50, 88]
- ↑16 Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 108.
- ↑17 Matthias Alexander, “Stadtentwicklung: EZB darf Annexbauten der Großmarkthalle abreißen.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 19.02.2007. Accessed 2020-01-07. <<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/rhein-main/frankfurt/stadtentwicklung-ezb-darf-annexbauten-der-grossmarkthalle-abreissen-1407202.html>>.
- ↑18 *Die Sonneninsel (The Sun Island): European Growth, Ideals, Aspirations, and Intricacies.* *Mediapolis, A Journal of Cities and Culture* 2, no.5 (January 2018) <<https://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2018/01/the-sun-island>>