XVIII Limina Award for Film Studies Books

Thomas Elsaesser
European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment
New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, pp. 341

Thomas Elsaesser passed away on 4 December 2019 in Beijing during a visiting professorship in China. His death occurred completely unexpectedly during a life of high-speed scientific activity in many countries around the world, as most of us have known and loved him for years. The Limina Award 2020 conferred on his last book is also a posthumous homage for his whole work, in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the development of cinema and media studies during the last four decades. It is no exaggeration to say that he occupied a leading role in international film historiography.

Born 1943 in Berlin, growing up in Mannheim, in 1963 he went to England as a student, where he then became a teacher at the University of East Anglia, founding a Film Studies department there in 1976. In 1991 he moved to the University of Amsterdam to build up a new and large Department of Film and Television Studies. He taught as a Visiting Professor in the USA and many other countries.

His books cover European and American cinema, often with a comparative approach and covering a wide range from early cinema to digitalisation nowadays, with a special focus on German film history. Elsaesser opens a broad historical contextualisation in a complex methodological setting using the results of different disciplines bringing up a completely new analytical reading of film history. His *Weimar Cinema and After* (2000) is certainly the most important writing on this topic; it is grounded on Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler,* but at the same time methodologically goes beyond Kracauer.

In 2007 Elsaesser already received the Premio Limina for his *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (2006). His latest book, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment,* is in a certain sense a continuation of the previous work. Starting from an analysis of the crisis of European cinema and society and referring to philosophers such as Badiou, Rancière, Nancy, Deleuze, Žižek, Agamben, Lévinas and Julia Kristeva's concept of the 'abject' as well as to films by Claire Denis, Aki Karismäki, Fatih Akin, Lars von Trier, Christian Petzold and others, he postulates filmmaking as a 'thought experiment,' as a kind of a new 'politique des auteurs,' a cinematic philosophy with 'post-heroic narratives' told from the perspective of social outsiders. The

book, which includes new and older essays, presents a highly experimental and radical line of argumentation, and it is not free of contradictions. But it is exactly this analytic radicality that reminds us of Thomas Elsaesser, who has given so many fundamental impulses to many colleagues and students all over the world, thus setting a new standard for film historiography and film theory.

[Irmbert Schenk, Bremen Universität]

This is the last book that Thomas Elsaesser saw published during his lifetime. It brings together two concerns that were close to his heart and that he continuously returned to: European cinema in all its permutations and transformations and contemporary theory for which he had a voracious appetite. Whenever you would have a coffee or drink with him, he would inquire if you had seen or read something interesting and new. His gift for quickly grasping the essential intellectual essence of a thought system and integrating it into his own intellectual universe were formidable. This book is a testament to Thomas' talent, as it presents some of the most exciting current European filmmakers (Claire Denis, Christian Petzold, Lars von Trier) and confronts them with contemporary theoreticians (Jean-Luc Nancy, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Rancière) — and vice versa. *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy* is itself a thought experiment that will continue to be influential long after Thomas' untimely death.

[Malte Hagener, Philipps-Universität Marburg]