Reviews

Thomas Elsaesser (2019) *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film As Thought Experiment*, London: Bloomsbury, 352 pp.

"[T]here is never a good moment to try and say something definitive, least of all about 'Europe' or about 'cinema,'" writes Thomas Elsaesser in the acknowledgments to what would become his final book (p. vii). True to form, however, the pioneering film theorist and historian seemingly can't resist the urge to accept such a challenge. In *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film As Thought Experiment*, Elsaesser, who died in December 2019 at the age of 76, gamely takes on debates regarding film as philosophy, emerging ontologies of digital and 'post-cinema', the politics and ethics of globalisation and multiculturalism, auteurism in twenty first century European cinema, and the very idea of contemporary Europe itself. In myriad ways, then, the book is a fitting coda to a venerable career that has explored film from nearly every conceivable theoretical, aesthetic, and socio-political angle. What began with a focus on Weimar cinema and Hollywood melodrama grew to include everything from new media studies to media archaeology to theories of embodiment and spectatorship, with *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (Elsaesser and Hagener 2007) becoming as crucial a text to the latter as Elsaesser's writings on Fassbinder and Sirk are to the study of New German Cinema and mid-century Hollywood "weepies".

With this final volume, Elsaesser shifts his focus to the "philosophical turn" in film studies with characteristic comprehensiveness. He makes

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his case convincingly and exhaustively (and, perhaps, somewhat exhaustingly as well), arguing that while films might not necessarily "do" philosophy (the so-called "bold hypothesis"), they can and often do function as philosophical thought experiments. According to Elsaesser, the conditions under which a film can be considered a thought experiment are quite specific: "its realism, such as it is, is of a stylised kind, its narrative situations are often schematic or inherently implausible or far-fetched, the characters' psychological make-up is extreme or borders on the pathological, and their motivation is either left obscure or is manifestly perverse" (p. 230). Building on his previous hypotheses regarding "mind-game" films, which he reiterates here at length, Elsaesser identifies a strain of recent European cinema that operates under these terms, which are inextricable from the political and social realities of contemporary Europe. Europe, Elsaesser asserts, is "a continent in decline" (p. 21), and its current cinema can address the "philosophical problem" this decline creates: "how to manage, defend, jettison or redefine values of the Enlightenment" by testing these values under "a paradoxical form of negative agency" that he associates with abjection (pp. 21–22).

Over the course of twelve chapters, Elsaesser identifies key filmmakers whose work embraces his idea of abjection as a liberating response to Europe's identified political and social disarray, including Michael Haneke (*Das weiße Band, Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte/The White Ribbon*, Germany/Austria/France/Italy/Canada 2009), the Dardenne brothers (*Rosetta*, France/Belgium, 1999), Aki Kaurismäki (*Mies vailla menneisyyttä/The Man Without a Past*, Finland/Germany/France, 2002), Christian Petzold (*Barbara*, Germany, 2012), Claire Denis (*Beau Travail*, France, 1999) and Lars von Trier (*Melancholia*, Denmark/Sweden/France/Germany, 2011). He explores the films through the work of various continental philosophers (Emmanuel Levinas, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Jean-Luc Nancy, Julia Kristeva, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek, among others) with a focus on ethics, specifically as it relates to the political and societal implications of abjection.

Almost two-thirds of the book is devoted to setting out his argument in detail: Europe has become marginalised through a series of "traumas" (aging demographics, the continuing reverberations of the Holocaust on its "moral compass", the "confrontation and accommodation with" Islam) (p. 13). Globalisation and the end of the Cold War have thrown off balance the European "*heroic narrative* of self-identity and self-creation", and post-Nietzschean philosophy (particularly deconstructionism) has further interrogated this grand historical narrative of Enlightenment and exceptionalism to the point of dissolution (pp. 10–11, original

emphasis). These traumas and complications are reflected in tendencies in contemporary European cinema, specifically through the idea of abjection, and Elsaesser sees this as a positive development. At several points invoking Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener", he identifies abjection as a negative form of freedom, "the freedom to choose not to" (p. 13): "[t]he ethics of abjection derives from the fact that the abject has nothing more to lose, but also has no claims to make, thus commanding a particular kind of freedom that probes the limits of both freedom and the law" (p. 15).

Elsaesser is quick to delineate between his view of abjection and the term's more obvious associations, including Kristeva's psychoanalytical theories of abjection and the aesthetics of abjection in fine art (pp. 135–136), which both relate specifically to forms of bodily disgust (p. 130). While he details notions of abjection deriving from Kristeva's theories, such as Barbara Creed's feminist critique of body horror (p. 148), Elsaesser's notion of the abject is "more structural than substantive": "[t]he *structural* version of the abject, prior to any specific bodily substance or psychological response, insists on disorder and disorientation" (p. 137, original emphasis). His vision hews more closely to Agamben's concept of the *homo sacer*, or "bare life": rather than "striving for equality" and emancipation, as in the philosophy of Rancière, for Agamben (according to Žižek, whom Elsaesser quotes liberally), "the implication... is not that we should fight for the inclusion of the excluded, but that *Homo Sacer* is the 'truth' of all of us, that it stands for the zero level position in which we are all placed" (Žižek, quoted in Elsaesser, p. 115). Elsaesser takes Agamben's arguments even further: Europe as thought experiment posits a "*positive* relation of inside and outside, yet based on *negative* criteria", a form of "passive resistance" to dehumanising forces (p. 119, original emphasis).

Elsaesser continually stresses the point that abjects are not victims, but neither are they perpetrators or saints; "they do not embody power but neither are they powerless" (p. 190). Instead, their contradictory position makes them an ideal stand-in "for the 'other' within the self, thereby avoiding the mirroring divisions and overcoming the dichotomy of self and other" (p. 190). Interestingly, he identifies the progenitors of a contemporary cinema of abjection as Chantel Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Belgium/France, 1975) and Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond* (France, 1985), which suggests strong feminist links to his structural notion of abjection as well.

Drawing a straight line between abject bodies and the "post-heroic narrative" evinced in contemporary European cinema, and inspired by Levinasian ethics, he introduces the concept of "mutual interference",

which serves a similar, if not identical purpose, to others that Elsaesser introduces over the course of the book, including "double occupancy", "antagonistic mutuality", and "servant of two masters". Rather than reducing the other to self-same, "mutual interference" allows for "taking responsibility for the Other, while neither imposing on the Other nor forsaking self-interest, but acting out of 'enlightened altruism'" (p. 194). He specifically relates this "utopian option" to the "problematic ideology of multiculturalism" (p. 194), a significant refrain throughout the book. For Elsaesser (as perhaps for Levinas), multiculturalism "implies the speaker's superior position, which the term renders, as it were, unassailable and unquestioned, thus giving with one hand what it takes away with the other" (pp. 102–3). In his reading of Turkish-German filmmaker Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand/Head-On* (Germany/Turkey, 2004), he writes, "[t]he 'ethical' power of the film, to my mind, then, comes from not only *not* marking any difference between 'Turkish' and 'German' culture... [but] instead emphasiz[ing] the risks that a true encounter with the Other poses to all forms of identity thinking" (p. 212). Linking identity politics with Rancière's conception of "l'éthique soft" ("a multiply aggrieved, but ultimately unified community of victims"), he clearly advocates instead for the stance of "l'éthique hard" ("the ethics of radical alterity") (p. 215). For Elsaesser, a cinema of abjection takes social and political injustice as "a given, the natural state of the world, in order to intimate a different kind of 'reboot of the system'" (p. 131).

The book's final chapters mainly relate to various "case studies", analyses of films that serve as thought experiments in Elsaesser's context of a cinema of abjection. He seems most captivated by *Melancholia* (which features on the book's cover), and perhaps by von Trier himself. Viewing the film's "exploratory play of 'what if' possibilities" as "directly challeng-[ing] the idea of cinema as a mode of representation" (p. 251), Elsaesser even posits in his final chapter that von Trier becomes the embodiment of abjection via the concept of creative constraints and "performative self-contradiction", both providing "productive counter-strategies from *within* the system, rather than continuing to pursue (increasingly ineffective) oppositional stances from without" (p. 279, original emphasis). By gleefully assuming the mantle of persona non grata at the Cannes Film Festival, for example, von Trier casts himself as abject in order to "assert autonomy as an artist" (p. 293). Whatever one thinks about von Trier or his films, it's difficult to counter Elsaesser's claim that he embodies the idea of the "auteur as entrepreneur, as brand name, as well as facilitator and enabler" (p. 291).

For Elsaesser, "the new marginality of Europe (not only) *when applied to the cinema* should be seized as an opportunity even more than seen as an

occasion for nostalgia or regret" (p. 7, original emphasis). It is a sentiment that feels as much like a call to arms as a central thesis for this persuasive, heady, and challenging book. Elsaesser leaves a formidable legacy behind him, and *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy* marks a provocative way forward for contemporary European cinema in its struggle to remain relevant in a fast-changing technological, political and cultural landscape.

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