

SCMS ORAL HISTORIES: INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS ELSAESSER

Patrice Petro: Hello, my name is Patrice Petro. Today is Friday March 21st. We are sitting in a suite in the Sheraton Hotel at the SCMS conference in 2014 in Seattle. With me is Thomas Elsaesser. He is a prolific and award-winning scholar of film studies, whose work extends beyond the study of film to include television studies, new media studies, art and cultural memory, system theory and telecommunications. He has written extensively and eloquently on such topics as melodrama, memory, European and Hollywood cinema, media archaeology, the avant-garde and the archive. While Elsaesser is perhaps best known for his studies on almost every period of German film history, from early film to the cinema of the Weimar Republic to the New German Cinema, he's also written and co-edited numerous books including most recently those on early cinema, television, and new media. Among his most recent books are *Film Theory an Introduction through the Senses* from 2010, *The Persistence of Hollywood* from 2012 and *German Cinema: Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory since 1945*, which came out in 2013. So lets begin.

In your 2008 Distinguished Career Achievement Award - at the time called the Lifetime Membership Award - but in that 2008 Distinguished Career address you said, and I quote: "my career as a film scholar has often seemed based on a series of misunderstandings, mostly productive ones to be sure, but in true melodramatic fashion, out of sync, too soon, too late, the right thing at the wrong place or vice-versa." So my first question is prefaced by this and to say, it is well known that you came of age as a cinephile during the 1960's, founding and running a film magazine, *Monogram*, and writing one of the major written articles on Hollywood auteurs, what got you interested in becoming a film and media scholar?

Thomas Elsaesser: Thank you Patrice. I am glad to be here. You are right that at a certain point I was thinking of my career as what we now call parapraxis, in other words, successful failures. But thinking about it again, and going back a little bit into my biography, it is also a structured schizophrenia. Because I started watching films on a regular basis quite early, when I was fourteen, a year after my maternal grandfather died because my job became to be the chaperon of my now widowed grandmother. My grandmother had one great passion, which was the cinema. She had a special passion for Burt Lancaster. So we saw a lot of films with Lancaster together, which were way beyond my age but certainty totally fascinating: *From Here to Eternity*, *Greatest Show on Earth* and many, many others. But my parents were also cinephiles. They were members of a film club that met every Friday. So when on Sunday night and Wednesday I went on my grandmother's, on Friday night I went with my parents. But my parents were absolutely bourgeois, middle class film consumers who adored Rossellini, Bresson, Bergman, and many other names from the mid 50's, because this all happened around 1956-1957. I also got as a birthday present a subscription to the only serious German film magazine at the time, *Filmkritik*, of which it turned out I was one of the longest subscribing members right in the bitter end in the 70's and 80's. So I grew up with two apparently conflicting cinematic traditions, on the one hand a love of Hollywood movies, melodramas, weepies, action films, and a deep respect for European cinema at the same time.

P.P.: Fascinating. I wonder if you could describe your first teaching job at a University. Your Doctorate was in Comparative Literature, and I wonder, your first teaching job, where was it? How did you get it? What was the first course on film and media studies you taught? What could you tell us about that?

T.E.: I studied at the University of Sussex in England, starting in 1963, after breaking off a study of Russian and Polish literature in Heidelberg University in 1962. At Sussex I continued with my serious interest in the cinema by participating in a film club and then starting a film magazine –maybe we can talk about that a little bit later. In 1973 I was hired by the University of East Anglia in comparative literature because, as you said, my PhD was in English and French in comparative literature. Since I was still at that point actively involved in the film critical community in Britain - in London as well - I was very much motivated to introduce film as an academic subject at my new home, the University of East Anglia, and received backing for this from the British Film Institute, from its Education Department, which at the time was run by Ed Buscombe and Peter Wollen. So we concocted a scheme whereby the so-called New Universities - and East Anglia was one of the New Universities in Britain, founded in the 60's - we were able to draw on funds that the BFI was making available to hire people teaching film at university level. To do this, to give seed money, as it was called, for 3 years on the assumption that the university would then take over this particular position. At that time I had already begun to explore what it would mean to teach film in a university setting through a combination that probably was quite typical for the time, namely novel into film. In other words, very much with regards to the sensibilities and orthodoxies of literature studies, and seeing how one could actually talk about adaptation without a priori assuming that a film adaptation of a novel must be worse than the novel. So that was the first, if you like, counter-intuitive or counter-institutional move that I made, through a very conventional and to my mind not particularly productive topic, Novel into Film, to introduce a new agenda. But when we then hired our first film scholars, Charles Barr, we very quickly moved to establishing film studies in its own right, and we were extremely successful in building up an undergraduate program within English and American studies. Because that was the point, mid-70's, when students just loved to talk about movies and had sufficient background in the movies to talk about them seriously and want to be challenged also at the theoretical level.

P.P.: Could you discuss the dynamics of film and media publishing during the early phase of your career? You already mentioned being a long subscriber to *Filmkritik*, but what were the possibilities for publishing in film and how did this shape what you wrote about?

T.E.: Well, at the University of Sussex in 1963 we ran a film club, and for this film club, probably because I was used to going to film clubs in Germany where they had program notes, I initiated writing program notes for the films we were showing in the film club. And I drew quite heavily on the two sources I had available or that I was familiar with. One was *Filmkritik* and the other was *Cahiers du Cinéma*. I had by then become a fairly regular reader of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and also of its British equivalent, namely *Movie Magazine*. So we were plundering quite shamelessly those journals in providing notes for our viewers. After a few years I thought this was rather... First of all I then began to write my own notes

for the films rather than simply cutting and pasting quotes from others, and I thought: this is rather ephemeral, I put a lot of work in that and it was always painful to see people on the way out throwing my text into the wastepaper basket. So I thought there must be a way of preserving this. So what I decided is to start a film magazine called the *Brighton Film Review*, which was basically a listings magazine, not just for the university's film club but also for all the cinemas in Brighton. This was before listings magazines like *Time Out* ever appeared, so we had a listings part with caption reviews of the films that were shown in the town, and we used the second half of the magazine to write longer articles. So my first publications actually took place around the magazine and they were in a duplicated form, **roneotype gestetner**, running it off of a drum. I was lucky with this because I was subletting a room in a house, in a kind of commune that was run by the Trotskyist fraction of the Labour Party in Brighton. They had acquired this rather exotic machine, like a **gestetner** machine for their own pamphlets and so on, so I appropriated that machine as my publication tool.

P.P.: I wanted to talk about one of your early and certainly ground-breaking essays that's still read and debated and talked about today. Namely your essay "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" from 1972. I think what many people in our midst in the field don't understand is that this is actually the second of a three part series of essays in *Monogram*, the first essay was "The American Cinema: Why Hollywood", which addresses classical narration, the second "Tales of Sound and Fury" speaks about melodrama as found in family melodramas of the 1950's and the third "Pathos of Failure" explores road-movies of the 1970's. Can you tell us more about your thinking about this three part series?

T.E.: Yes. This was an attempt, in the early 70's, 71-72, when the mood had already dramatically changed towards anti-Hollywood sentiment. This had a lot to do with '68, with the Vietnam War. So in Europe, generally, but in Britain in particular, there was a sense that we had to fight against American ideology. The famous phrase from Jean-Luc Godard - we have to start two or three Vietnams in Hollywood, Cinecittá and Mosfilms¹ - so the tendency, the trend, famously embodied by *Screen* magazine, was to denounce Hollywood films as American propaganda or ideology. Partly maybe because of, as I said, this loyalty to my grandmother, I couldn't move that quickly from loving Hollywood to denouncing Hollywood. So we in the magazine decided we are going to keep the faith with Hollywood, but in order to keep the faith we felt, or I felt, I had to redraft its history. I had to get us away from auteurism, and even to some extent from genre studies, and offer a more comprehensive view of what was distinctive, special, and valuable about Hollywood, which is when, I must have been one of the very first in English literature to use that term classical Hollywood. That was the attempt to indicate that there was something beyond ideology. Calling it classical Hollywood was a way of charting a path and using concepts that couldn't be immediately dismissed as ideology. So there was this idea that obviously started: I wanted to write one big article that turned out to be too long, so I put it into a trilogy, you know the usual way. In a way that is where this missteps first started, because

¹ "We also have to create two or three Vietnams in the heart of the immense Hollywood-Cinecittá-Mosfilms-Pinewood empire." In the press-book to *La Chinoise* (August, 1967)

as you say, the “Tales of Sound and Fury” was planned as just one part, taking it from classical Hollywood of 30’s and 40’s, to a special kind of practice that was beyond the auteur and beyond the genre, because I was also interested in the musical and one of the things in the article that now doesn’t fall in sight, was about the musical and especially about the relationship of musical and melodrama in works of Vincente Minnelli, for instance. So there was a way of overcoming auteurism and genre studies in order to establish what I then called classical Hollywood. But, in the subsequent years, for reasons that we can talk about, namely the shift from even auteur and genre studies to reception studies in particular to gender studies and feminism. This particular, the middle part of this trilogy was picked up and rediscovered, as almost as if it was re-read by a different constituency that founded it a useful bridge to some other concerns. That is why I was saying at the talk that you mentioned that I benefited hugely from a misreading of this particular article.

P.P: Just to follow up on that, “Tales of Sound and Fury” served as a touchstone for discussing melodrama, American cultural and psychological contexts. More recently scholars such as Chris Gledhill have discussed your essay as a transitional piece poised between the auteurish and the *mise-en-scene* approaches of the 1960’s and the ideological concerns of the 1970’s. Still, other scholars such as Cynthia Baron have seen this essay as transitional in the sense that it applied formal analysis traditionally reserved for high art to popular culture, as such, she claims that it marks a shift from modernist to postmodernist criticism while countering this view of classical Hollywood cinema as monolithic as you have just described. Given the sustained interest in your essay and in melodrama over time, how would you situate this essay now both historically, transitionally, in relation to the field and in relation to recent work in melodrama such as Linda Williams’s *Playing the Race Card*.

T.E.: Well, in one sense this piece no longer belongs to me so I don’t have any interpretative priority over how others read it. So I can only answer that, along with all the others that have tried to make sense of it. But I can say something that perhaps clarifies why it emerged in this particular form. I wrote it in 1971 at a point when I was also finishing my PhD. Now, my PhD was on 19th Century novels. Well it started off as being about the influence of Walter Scott on French novels, which is a classic comp-lit topic and which bored the hell out of me quite frankly. So when I went to Paris, I incidentally spent most of my time at the Cinematheque, where I really got my cinematic education at the feet of Henri Langlois and sitting next to Jean-Pierre Léaud and having Jean-Luc Godard in the row in front of me. During that year in Paris I completely changed what was to become my thesis, namely I discovered all about a book on Jules Michelet, the historian, and I conceived a new topic, which was a comparative study of the history of the French Revolution by Jules Michelet and a history of the French Revolution by Thomas Carlyle. Both of them writing in the 1840’s and reflecting on the 1789 revolution in France, but I was also writing this in ‘68 or commencing in ‘68 so three revolutions were reflexively doubled by my thesis. What it did mean is that I was fairly aware of novelists like Balzac, (18:39)? , Dickens, and so on who had massively used the historical novel and romantic historiography, which incidentally explains why Peter Brooks and I simply had come up with the same version of melodrama, because we are both deeply steeped in French 19th Century novels and

historiography, that's just by the by. My own approach actually, as I discovered much later, was also very close to Hayden White's *Metahistory*, because it was actually an analysis of the narrative tropes in those histories rather than are they true or are they ideological. So, there probably was more than simply this "misreading" or "productive misreading" or what Harold Bloom calls "creative misreading" of that piece. Something that allowed at least answers what you were saying about some talking about it in terms of my article on melodrama, in terms of its formalism, others talk about it in terms of providing a historical background that goes back to the 19th Century and also to theatre for American melodrama. When I now look back I've been thinking about publishing my own commentary on this piece, after all it is now forty-years old, pretty well exactly as it was published in 1974. There are two ways that I now think about it or that I think through it and in one sense it follows the lines that Linda Williams has proposed, namely to make melodrama not the exception to classical Hollywood but the very foundation of classical Hollywood. I still would hold on to my initial intuition, namely that the massive effect that European émigrés directors had on this particular form and also that it was a form of excess, I would hold on to that. In fact my book on Hollywood, which I published a couple of years ago, *The Persistence of Hollywood*, is reinstating or reaffirming classical Hollywood but not from the point of view of melodrama. In other words, it looks at the constitutive regularities of Hollywood but also looks at different forms of reflexivity, because one of the things I discovered is that our initial insight into auteurism, namely that we like the films, what we call auteurist films, films that were highly reflexive about the medium itself and about questions of illusion and reality, appearance and truth and so on and so forth. This reflexivity was actually there, but we located it in the wrong instance. In other words, we created the auteur as the locus for this reflexivity when in fact I discovered, but in a sense it was already there from the beginning, that this reflexivity, in very different forms, is actually a characteristic of the system. So in the second half of my book on the persistence of Hollywood I actually try to describe certain things that we all know about the industry, like the Hays Code, the Rating System, the Academy Awards, not as isolated or extraneous elements but constitutive of a form of self-regulation, which is also a form of self-reflexivity. That also includes the way in which in post-classical cinema Hollywood movies are very concerned with the brand. They promote the brand. With a massive promotion of studio identity they enter into the digital world. So, in the second half of that book I, in that sense, reinstate what was the first article of that trilogy, what exactly was classical about classical Hollywood and how can we see this in alignment with industry practice and what we know about how Hollywood functions. And not as in the Auteur Theory, conceiving it as the exception. So that was one part, the second part of it which is taking up the melodrama one, is to actually look at what forms of excess have existed in Hollywood and so the book that I am currently finishing is called *Melodrama, Trauma and Mind Games*, and these are three modalities of excess in American Cinema where I do actually, in that sense, follow the "misreading" by taking the gender or feminist impact on melodrama or its addressee of women and then look at trauma films from the male perspective and expand this into talking about mind game films as addressing a more global subject about globalization but also a kind of philosophical uncertainty about the grounds on which we do experience the world and indeed experience the cinema now in its digital form.

P.P.: So, what would be an example of a mind game film, a Haneke film? What do you talk about in terms of a mind game film?

T.E.: Well, let's take a film like *Inception* or the *Usual Suspects* or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. In other words, films where it is no longer possible to say that the perception of the world as filtered through a particular character makes this character into a pathological case. Because we are obliged to share the view of this character without having a distinctive subjective perspective attached to it. In other words we are plunged into this particular worldview and we have every reason to think it is "the real world". It is only at a certain point that we have doubts and we see how that certainty is radically undermined, to the extent that we then no longer find ourselves having any ground in realism or fantasy or genre, because now I understand how this film works. We are left with a kind of duck-rabbit, a multiple image, it could be this it could be that, which in ways that I hope to be able to demonstrate, continues the particular strategies of melodrama that also give you one image of American life, and then in searching for that, a radical counter-version. Or indeed in films of trauma that are characterized by repetition, by misprision and so on.

P.P.: What about the road movie? I'm just curious.

T.E.: The road movie is interesting because of its very title, because I call it the pathos of failure and the overarching concept in this melodrama, mind game, trauma book is, the concept that I am making a case for is parapraxis, in other words a way of appearing. Parapraxis is the anglicised version of a Freudian term, a term that comes in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* - we call it the Freudian slip usually, which is actually much more interesting and much more complex - but it has, to me, a great advantage over other terms from psychoanalysis that Freud very rarely uses it other than for the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and he also is quite clear that it does not necessarily imply a hidden unconscious or any kind of deep structure, is actually something that is very much on the surface, and it's a way of indeterminacy or coincidence or accident - misspelling a word or whatever a slip might in actual fact be - by showing that these contingencies, these accidents only make sense retroactively, only once you've been told that you actually now committed a Freudian slip are you becoming aware of it. So like trauma and to some extent mind games, you are constantly involved in a revision of your first assumptions, in the case of Freudian slips that you spoke your mind and you only then realize you spoke two minds. So that concept of parapraxis I think is extremely fertile for understanding certain ways in which films, or these particular modes or genres, but I would then claim Hollywood in the broader sense, is always dependent or is one of its great assets is this activity of retroactive construction of making sense of something which is either ambiguous or as I also call it is characterized by structural ambiguity, or which is just so overloading us with stimuli that we need to retroactively short out what makes sense and how we relate to that sense.

P.P.: With that in mind and turning to a more pragmatic or practical kind of question, I wonder in terms of thinking retroactively now about the institution of film studies and how it developed from the 60's until today, if you could tell us what were the salient

characteristics of the context in which film studies grew and flourished in this time. I am thinking 60's, 70's, 80's and then we can get to the 90's where many people say film studies died.

T.E.: I suppose I am very privileged in so far as I have been actively involved in film studies for now 50 years. That's given me both, a certain view of the field and its history, but also perhaps a certain detachment because I have seen so many paradigms come and go, that a certain radicalism but also a certain scepticism belongs to my intellectual make up when it comes to film studies, which may actually sometimes mean that I am unfair to current practices or to particular factions or individuals who hold dear their particular version of film studies. So as I said, I started by seeing Hollywood movies without ever thinking at all about the director, in a classic way thinking about it in terms of stars mainly, but I grew up, I became aware of the cinema through auteurism. Very much influenced by *Cahiers* and *Filmkritik* - which had also an auteurish approach - But I should say that books that I read in those days, in the late 50's early 60's, were actually of a different kind, so maybe was another source. That was Parker Tyler, who was a great influence on me, who had a very dandy-esque approach to the cinema, popular but also what we might call a gay sensibility bringing to film. Oddly enough it wasn't Kracauer or indeed Bazin, although I read them in the 60's, the other one that I read was Edgar Morin. *Le cinema ou l'homme imaginaire* was a book, of which I still have my copy, heavily underlined with notes on the margin. So it was Parker Tyler and Edgar Morin, and later on in England, besides reading *Movie Magazine* and continue with *Cahiers*, it was Raymond Durgnat, also somebody who fell outside of the orthodoxies, who I greatly respect and we got to know each other quite well. I always had a great respect for Raymond Durgnat's way of looking at the cinema, heavily influenced by surrealism, and so Durgnat was the English equivalent of *Positif* in France rather than *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Movie*. So maybe I could never make up my mind or as I said I had a structured schizophrenia or opportunism, I don't know. In that sense, my background or my likes in paradigms were always quite heterodox and polymorphously perverse if you like. But, my partners in dialogue in the late 60's and early 70's was definitively *Screen* magazine, and indeed *Tales of Sound and Fury* was first presented at one of the B.F.I seminars, and it was ripped to shreds by Ben Brewster, Sam Rohdie - who was then the editor of *Screen*, and Ben Brewster was editor later on - but it was Peter Wollen who actually said "hang on a minute, he might have a point there." So, in actual facts, the person who I am most heavily indebted to, personally but especially professionally, is Peter Wollen. And of course through Peter Wollen I got to know Laura Mulvey. So my friendship with Laura also dates back to the late 60's.

P.P.: Was there something about the United States that provided a particular impetus, either to your own development or to the development or the context for film studies at the university, or another country?

T.E.: Absolutely it was United States. As I said in 1975-76, when we appointed Charles Barr, we step up film studies, and I wanted to know how film studies was taught in the United States. I knew they were institutionally ahead of us. I heard that Ed Buscombe had gone to Iowa, so I contacted Ed and I said: look Ed is there any chance that you could just mention my name because I would quite like to spend a semester or whatever in the States to learn

about film studies. As it happens at that point in Iowa Dudley Andrew had received a grant to go to France for a year to write his book on André Bazin. So I entered into correspondence with Dudley, who I didn't know at all, and he said: sure yeah, why not, you come and replace me. Or rather it was actually with Allan Williams and myself, because Dudley was at that point quite senior so he could divide a salary between two of us. So Allan Williams and I spent the year together teaching students in Iowa. I taught MA and PhD students and I think Allan had to take undergraduate classes as well. And I actually lived in Dudley's house, which had another benefit, namely a 16mm projector and a cache of movies. I was especially lucky because the year when I was at Iowa was also the year were Mary Anne Doane, Phil Rossen, Jane Feuer, and several others, Pam Falkenberg were also PhD students in Iowa, so in actual fact not only did I learn how to set up film studies - incidentally including the first analytic projector I had ever known, which is a projector whose light source you could dim down to the point that you could actually freeze a movie. So we were actually privileged watching movies the way only the generation that came after me, namely who had video and could actually analyze films. So we were practicing close textual reading in a way that was pretty unique in Iowa. So I learnt a lot more from my students, my brilliant students, and from Iowa, than I was able to bring to Iowa, except that I did have to make a compromise, I wasn't allowed to teach Hollywood I had to teach German Cinema. So that was my discovery of German Cinema. The only way I could get into American academia was to teach something I had totally ignored and actually had a distinct distaste for because 50's and 60's German cinema was not the cinema that anybody at that time found particularly interesting.

P.P.: I think you and I met in 1981 at the University of California Santa Barbara and it is interesting what you said to me about Peter Wollen and the foundational role he played, and certainly he was. When I was a student there, graduate student in history at the time in the early 80s, the program would bring in scholars from various places including Stanley Cavell, Peter Wollen and certainly you - I think I was your teaching assistant. But I wonder, you know, I know that the Iowa program which I eventually went to in 1982, but you had a lot to do with the Santa Barbara program too, and I know from just your vitae and from the things that I know from our friendship over many years that there's been other programs that were influential, that you helped to shape as well and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about those.

T.E.: I was very lucky. There was a conjunction of different factors, which was that I was at the University of East Anglia and if you know East Anglia the winters are very wet and very severe, not in the American way but just clammy and wet, never really cold so it snows, never really barmy so you can just survive. So I had the desperate need to get away if I could from East Anglia during the winter months and the conjunction was that at that point many American universities discovered the New German Cinema and were very keen to bring people to the United States to their campuses that could say something about New German Cinema. Since I published on Fassbinder at that point I was beginning to think seriously about it. I actually became one of those people that you hired in the States to talk about New German Cinema. For the next eight years I was doing the U.C system. I was in Santa Barbara when indeed you were my TA, very successfully...

P.P.: Thanks for that.

T.E.: A great help. But also I was in San Diego, I was in UCLA...in UCLA I had to teach not only what I taught on New German Cinema to the MA students but I had to teach Neorealism to the graduate students, and I had there amongst, again very lucky, I had John Lewis in my class, I had Erick Smoothen in my class, I had Jeff Gilmore, I had Fabrize Silcofsky, I had Michael Friend and a lot of other people that then became major figures. Steve Richie as well...major figures, both within UCLA and within the larger film community. But I also taught at Irvine where **Rick Rentschler** was my host. I taught at Berkeley... so throughout those years I was extremely lucky to escape the winter of East Anglia, and sun myself in California.

P.P.: Well, of course you know I remember your courses on New German Cinema but I also remember you teaching graduate level courses on the Frankfurt School before really any kind of serious study in our field of the Frankfurt school. It was really the beginning of the serious study of the Frankfurt school that was taking place and I can see now retrospectively myself, given where your work is taking you now, what was interesting to you about really taking a very serious look against the standard view of Horkheimer and Adorno for instance, and what has, in the post 90's period, was called the other post-Frankfurt School, and had a more complicated relationships to Hollywood. I wonder if you wanted to say anything about that, because I remembered courses being very formative.

T.E.: Well one of the great experiences of my Iowa year was that I taught a course on Weimar cinema, about which I really knew very little. As I said, especially with some of the students who took the course, notably Mary Anne Doane, that was an extremely interesting and fruitful exchange. Also a challenge, because I realized I seriously had to study the period, not only the films but also the theoretical writings about it. So that was the point at which I seriously delved into Kracauer. Although I actually had, oddly enough, read Kracauer much earlier as a novelist. *Ginster*, his novel, I got it as a young man and it was a key term again like in a Proust novel I discovered another Kracauer right next to the one I thought I knew. Through Kracauer, which is one way of entering what you called the other Frankfurt School, through Kracauer I took a much more positive view of the way that Weimar cinema negotiated high culture and popular culture, media specificity, and politics. It was through Kracauer that I reread Benjamin who I again knew through the Artwork essay but hadn't really contextualized, and of course read Adorno and Horkheimer. And again I think it was in Iowa that I had the first opportunity to do an intensive course on the Frankfurt School and then took that as one of my graduate seminars to my UC journey.

P.P.: Interesting.

T.E.: But if I can just do that, it was through seriously studying Weimar cinema that I realized I needed to know a lot more about early cinema. So my turn to early cinema also reflects to some extent - since we are still on the impact or what did I get from America - it reflects again a moment where just following this involuntary turn to German cinema that the demand for courses on first New German Cinema, its directors, Wim Wenders, Herzog or Fassbinder, who reflect themselves back to American cinema or indeed to Weimar

Cinema -American cinema in the case of Fassbinder, Weimar cinema in the case of Herzog and Wenders-. I felt the need that I had to ground myself in something other than Weimar cinema, I didn't start out of nowhere and I was very baffled that someone like Kracauer didn't think or Eisenstein didn't think that what came before was very interesting. But that is also another conjuncture that I owe a lot to New York because it was my sense that the theoretical paradigms of, as I said I was always both involved in *Screen* and was always on the margins, slightly sceptical of it and one way of consolidating that scepticism was actually to say these sweeping claims about the essence of cinema, the apparatus, the direct relationship between Plato's cave parable and the cinematic apparatus. This is a good German historicist tradition or even Frankfurt School or Marxist tradition, there was such a lack of history that I really had to go into them more deeply. So the turn to history for me personally, maybe that is just my particular biography, the turn to history was through the Frankfurt School on the one hand and Michael Foucault on the other. Again I get part of my interest, love, devotion to French intellectual history and if you mind, German legacy. The locus of this other approach, this historicizing, was New York and the New York avant-garde. It was people like Jay Leyda, Annette Michelson, mediated from Noël Burch in particular that gave me a sense that there was a way of thinking about early cinema or pre-cinema with another contemporary interest in mine, namely the way that the American avant-garde had resisted for sometimes political and ideological reasons, resisted Hollywood, but I thought coming from Europe their resistance was actually more useful for me on a form of historical level than on an ideological level. In that sense I fairly early on made contact with Tom Gunning and Charlie Musser who came out of the NYU/avant-garde New York scene.

P.P.: It's interesting up to now what you have described was really cinema studies in England in the 60s and 70s, and then we have kind of moved to the development of film studies in the United States in the 70s and 80s that you were a part of. Then in the 90s you went to Amsterdam and I wonder if you would tell us a little bit about what was the difference between – certainly historical things were changing and shifting - these different locations teaching film and film scholarship.

T.E.: Before I actually moved to Amsterdam I practically didn't know it existed, it was not on my intellectual map or it wasn't even on my '68 counter-cultural map, as it was for many of my generation because you know the free drugs and all the rest of it, or the liberalization of drugs. So the fact that I ended up in Amsterdam was very contingent but nonetheless that contingency, again a kind of sideways move or parapraxis, retroactively it makes a lot of sense. It was initially prompted, or at least my sense that I may have to move elsewhere from East Anglia. I always knew that I didn't want to go permanently to the States, people obviously have been wondering a lot, with all these years if I was coming to the States why wasn't I making the jump. People said what's wrong with Elsaesser, there he is trying again to get a job and he doesn't get it or what's going on. It never occurred to me or rather when it was offered at one point there were discussions with universities I shouldn't mention now, it was quite clear to me what was really great about it was to come for 10 weeks, one quarter, and leave it as that. Replenish my intellectual contacts, learn new things from my students, and keep in touch with this incredible vibrant field as it then was, but the idea of actually migrating to the States never occurred to me as a serious proposition. So when in

1989 the Berlin wall fell and a new epoch seemed to go on in Europe, I thought I must seize this chance. We got it wrong in '68 lets get it right in '89. I knew intuitively, instinctively, and from experience that Britain was not ready to join Europe in this particular way. Obviously now in 2014, I was very optimistic and perhaps a little bit too starry-eyed about it, but I find myself still extremely loyal to that European vision which is held by the fact that as a German you had to be a good European before you could become a good German again. So I was already programmed to be a European rather than to give my first loyalty to my nation or my country. And it was quite clear that Britain was so traumatized by the loss of empire, as indeed France was traumatized by whatever, so it actually suited me to end up in the Netherlands because at least from the outside it looked such a liberal, open country. Furthermore I was really given carte blanche their, they said "we want to set up film studies, we know you did it in East Anglia, we know you have vast international experience from all your years in the States, we would like to offer you the job." So I flew into Amsterdam on the day on which George Bush senior declared war on Iraq, 19th of February of 91. And within three hours I had the job. So I said, fine I'll do it. Again I felt people said you must be crazy, why leave England and go to this weird place in the Netherlands, because as you know the word Dutch in English language has only negative or very ambivalent connotations. They also pointed out to me that a lot of academics who had been invited to teach in the Netherlands had terrible experiences there. So I said to those doubters, I said I can afford a big mistake. Parapraxis before I knew the term or used the term. Low and behold it was often in those years a close call if it was a mistake or whether if it was going to turn out a success, but in the end I think I was able to do more good than bad and I immediately decided that it had to be a department that broke with almost all the rules of what Dutch universities are used to and set it up in the American way. In fact it was a great opportunity to learn from my mistakes in setting up film studies at East Anglia, have another chance to get it right. That meant undergraduates, I knew we were going to be flooded with undergraduates but also knew if I let those undergraduates dictate the terms we would never have any kind of respect, we will only be used to keeping the kids out of the street. I was determined not to have that so I built an MA program and immediately started a PhD program and I also started as soon as feasible a series of publications with Amsterdam University Press, which was actually founded the very year that I came, so that I would be or that film studies would be represented at all levels: publications, PhD programs, MA programs and undergraduates. And that was a huge lift, we didn't have the resources, we killed ourselves doing it and it created also amongst my very young staff, none of them had actually done a PhD in film studies. I hired them really off the street. I had the chance of hiring two or three colleagues at relatively senior positions or at least intermediate positions but I also hired a lot of people straight out of the MA program or English literature and so on, just to have bodies on the ground to teach all the students that were coming in. It was tough years, it nearly broke me, it certainly wrecked the marriage but now looking back I don't regret it.

P.P.: Well, we are coming up to the end of our time here. The last question is a big question; you don't need to give a big answer. I just came from a panel where you were discussing all these issues in quite a lot of detail, but where do you feel that future of university film and media studies and scholarship is headed? What is the role of film theory and cinematic thinking today? And, I'm just wondering as you are looking forward, you are

now retired from the University of Amsterdam, they have a mandatory retirement, you are not certainly retired from the field at all but I am wondering what you see as the future directions or where we are headed.

T.E.: Well, the first answer is: I'm sitting back and letting it happen. I am very happy for new generations to take over and again I am very privileged, when I come to something with the size of the annual media studies conference I have at least three generations of my students presenting a paper. So it is up to them basically, they take it wherever they want to take it, they have my backing, they have my blessing. In that sense I am extremely grateful to be here as a grandfather rather than as an Oedipal father. That relieves a certain burden of not having to defend a particular ideology or particular paradigm. Looking at it from a slightly less biographical or autobiographical perspective I think we have huge challenges. I think on the one hand we are, as film studies, besieged by two major challenges. One challenge is that we have been too successful at the undergraduate level, which has meant that we have lost out or have missed out on resources in many of the universities and have been amalgamated and have been the first victims of a downsizing of the humanities quite generally. Furthermore because we are such an open field we have given a lot of people the opportunity to teach film without actually being formed in film studies. Anybody thinks now they can teach film. On the one hand that is good because we have all these missionaries out there doing the good work, on the other hand we have no control over how it is taught, we have very little grip on a kind of disciplinary backbone where we can call people to order and say look it is better done this way rather than that way. We've also obviously, and again that is part of the price for success, we have lost the coherence of the field as having one particular genealogy. That is, the classic genealogy of the theories, German, French, and American in the 20s, and then Bazin as a key figure, Metz and screen studies and so on, that particular line which allowed us both to be in constant dialogue with our predecessors and at the same time push certain questions back to the forefront over and over again in a way that a discipline does. That was denied to us in the 80s and 90s, it was "little flowers and flowers bloom" or whatever. What I sense is that the field is consolidating itself and this is interestingly enough under the challenge of the so-called digital, which means that a lot of us are now either, as it were corralling the wagons, and retrenching in redefining what we think the cinema is and we are quite happy to say maybe the cinema is over, not necessarily dead but it is now like other disciplines that deal with the past, and there is nothing wrong with that. It actually helps to put a kind of closure on it and once you have closure you have a new grip on what is essential to the field, the discipline and so on. As you know there are people very respected in our field who proceed along those lines. There are others who say, yes the cinema is over and I want to be on the other side, I want to be on the digital side, this is where the action is, this is where new things are and I don't care if cinema is interesting but it's a speciality, it's a niche like middle English or you know whatever the humanities have, like studying medieval manuscripts or byzantine icons. You study cinema the way they do their particular field. I am perfectly happy with that because what they need from the cinema they find now re-articulated, reworked in digital culture in one form or another, and that's fine. I belong to those precisely perhaps because I have been through so many paradigms and I've seen both their value but also their transitoriness, but I think it may be worthwhile to actually think about it in those longer terms that I was presenting earlier today where I was looking

at the relatively new phenomenon namely how film and philosophy now relate to each other after philosophy having ignored the cinema for the best part of a 100 years, a lot of philosophers are very interested in film, in cinema, and at the same time there are lots of film scholars who are interested in philosophy and actually think that the dilemmas and the deadlocks of film theory can be solved by moving to film philosophy. Of course there are divides open up between Anglo-Saxon pragmatists and analytical philosophers and continental philosophers more metaphysically inclined or de-constructivist inclined. I see that as a fruitful development because as long as we don't say we are not going to talk to the other side I think it's a very positive and potentially extremely productive dialogue that is about to take place, which doesn't mean I want to give that a particular priority. I think other movements, that are extremely important, is the globalization of film studies. In other words, whether you are in queer studies or whether European cinema or whether you are into horror as a genre, it's now understood you take a view of global cinema and not of your national cinema or even exclusively of Hollywood.

P.P.: Well, thank you very much for taking the time out of this very busy day to talk with me. Thanks very much

T.E.: Thank you.