



Joe McElhaney pays tribute to Thomas Elsaesser:

The unexpected death of Thomas Elsaesser, at 76, is a monumental loss for our field. The loss is partly tied to what will now, sadly, be the end of his inexhaustible publication activity: over two hundred essays and nearly two dozen books – perhaps more. (Who could keep track?) But it is also tied to his ubiquitous presence, one that was social, as in his numerous and highly anticipated conference presentations and invited lectures and his visiting professorships at universities throughout the world. Even his official retirement from the University of Amsterdam in 2008 did not slow him down. Thomas always seemed to be everywhere at once, receiving yet another prize for a specific publication or for the entirety of his professional career, including the Distinguished Career Achievement Award from SCMS in 2008. In a field that is getting larger and more atomized, he was a figure whom so many had encountered, engaged with in some form or other. But even more important than this visibility has been the influence of what he produced over the last five decades. Has there been any scholar in the field who made more of an impact, for so long and in so many varied ways, as Thomas Elsaesser? Regardless of one's own particular interests, there was most likely something on -- or related to -- the topic of one's research that Thomas himself had already published, taught, or given a lecture or conference paper on, something that he would so cogently and provocatively define that reading and citing him became a convention for many of us.

German-born, Thomas moved to England in 1963. In 1971, he received a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Sussex. But it was his early writings on the cinema, beginning in the late 1960s for such periodicals as Brighton Film Review and Monogram, which display the critical voice that would become central in later years. His work of this early period is clearly shaped by the closely linked sensibilities of auteurism and cinephilia. But even as Thomas was discovering them they were being challenged within the growing field of film studies, a field that he himself became a central figure in shaping. Such challenges to his formative influences led to him not so much repudiate his early work as to continually revise, rethink, explore new possibilities. His interest began to expand beyond auteurist canons in order to explore everything from early cinema to the digital, from found footage to the uses of film in gallery and museum spaces. There was something of the typical post-war West German subject in him, of the kind he would often later write about in, for example, his massive Fassbinder's Germany (1996). That he was very much aware of his own cultural status is apparent in the acknowledgements to New German Cinema (his first book, published in 1989) where he writes of the “shock” of these German films and of how they “opened wounds, memories and regrets that reached beyond the cinema, and brought a dissatisfaction and a restlessness which I soon recognised as the depressive’s disposition of a whole generation.” Thomas's sheer productivity as a scholar loosely parallels Fassbinder's own productivity as a filmmaker. Godard has stated that Fassbinder died of an “overdose of creative obligations.” And there was likewise a restlessness to Thomas's work and to his public life, the need to say and do as much as possible, to keep going, keep moving in order to testify to the various shifts taking place within his own profession.

At the same time, particularly in later years, there was also a need to return to things. This might be the Germany he left behind, explicitly addressed in his autobiographical 2017 video essay The Sun Island, that deals with his family, including his Jewish mother and his architect grandfather Martin Elsaesser, across three eras. He would die far from home and in a country, China, whose national



cinema he did not know very well. (Asian cinema, he would admit, was one area in which he could not claim to be an expert.) But where was home for Thomas? Amsterdam? Frankfurt? Or New York, where his much-loved wife, the scholar Silvia Vega-Llona, taught? In his 2005 essay “Cinephilia, and the Uses of Disenchantment,” he describes his own vivid experiences in seeking out auteurist rarities in run-down theaters throughout 1960s London. He writes here of cinephilia’s searches for lost plenitudes but also of its mournings, a world of “retroactive temporalities, pleasures tinged with regret.”

It is this search for lost plenitudes, the need to move away from, return to, and move away again from worlds that enchant and alienate that gives so much of Thomas Elsaesser’s work its power, a work whose importance we have only begun to understand.