

***German Cinema—Terror And Trauma: Cultural Memory since 1945.* Thomas Elsaesser. London, New York: Routledge, 2014. Pp. 352 (cloth).**

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The Problem with this Civilization is that it does not have an alternative to Auschwitz.¹

In 1966, aged 21, Rainer Werner Fassbinder wrote a play entitled *Nur eine Scheibe Brot (Just a Slice of Bread)*. The play consists of ten scenes and tells the story of a young man, Fricke, who wants to make a film about Auschwitz that does not comply with the official post-war *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Federal Republic of Germany) narrative on the events. The main character is afraid of spectacularising and trivialising such a sensitive issue without offering any insights into the causes that made the Holocaust happen. He is more inclined to make a film which acknowledges the limits of representation. Eventually, he succumbs to the temptation to produce an object which is based upon all the conventional, emotional clichés that one can identify in contemporary films on the subject; not surprisingly he receives public praise and a number of Federal prizes. Fassbinder's play proleptically addresses some of the key points raised later by Holocaust survivors such as Elie Wiesel, who reacted against the "trivialisation of memory" in mainstream cinema's portrayals of the concentration camps.² David Barnett has brilliantly captured the complexity of the play:

Although Fassbinder was still young and inexperienced at the time of writing, the play approaches the subject of the Holocaust from a surprisingly mature perspective and asks the question of how one represents the unrepresentable. He points to the difficulties of opening up highly sensitive subject matters to unorthodox modes of depiction in order to circumvent official standpoints. He also draws our attention to the material problems involved in making a film about Auschwitz in

¹ Heiner Müller, *Plays, Poetry, Prose*, trans. Carl Weber (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 151.

² Elie Wiesel, "Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory," *New York Times*, 11 June 1989.

which actors treat the job just as any other. While there are moments in the play that make it very much of its time, such as the generational clash between the idealistic Fricke and his uncle, Herr Baumbach, the aesthetic questions raised by the play remain current.³

Fassbinder's early and undeservedly overlooked play synopsis some of the representational questions tackled by the major filmmakers of the New German Cinema, who aimed to deal with the Holocaust and the traumas of fascism in ways that would not necessarily provide triumphalist declarations of reconciliation and facile therapeutic formulas for victims and perpetrators.

This preamble sets the context for discussing Thomas Elsaesser's outstanding new book, *German Cinema—Terror And Trauma: Cultural Memory since 1945*. The book reconsiders the impact of the Holocaust and its afterlife in post-war German films dealing with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (working through the past) and rethinks trauma theory in light of the current European culture of historical commemoration. The merit of this book is its strong historical vantage point, which does not treat the objects under discussion as museum pieces, but convincingly demonstrates their capacity to gain renewed significance and to produce diverse hermeneutical conundrums in different historical contexts/periods.

Let us start by unfolding the book's major theoretical standpoints. In the first section, titled "Terror, Trauma, Parapraxis," Elsaesser articulates the ways that trauma theory can offer a pathway to help us understand how sensitive historical incidents, which are entrenched in collective memory, reverberate in the present. He suggests that contemporary traumatic historical phenomena not only force us to look into the past to seek sufficient interpretative schemata, but also redefine and reformulate our relationship with the past. According to Elsaesser, in the present historical period, in which the collective "common projects," e.g. the struggle for social justice and the desire to change the world, are notably absent, shared traumatic memories from the past and the present remain (problematically) the sole collective narratives which can establish a group identity. But what renders historical events such as the Holocaust, and the

³ David Barnett, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the German Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 247.

emergence of radical leftist groups such as the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF), which reacted against the historical amnesia of the *Wirtschaftswunder* (the German economic miracle) and the smooth reintegration of former Nazis in politics and public offices, is their “afterlife” in the present. This afterlife creates fragmented continuities between the past and the present which showcase Europe’s inability to come to terms with the past (I will return to this later on).

A key term in Elsaesser’s conceptual repertoire is the Freudian term *Fehlleistung*, translated in English as parapraxis. It is his contention that in our engagement with moving images, parapraxis can produce “both a politics (in public life, the spheres of political action) and a poetics (manifest in literature, the cinema and other spheres of symbolic action).”⁴ Elsaesser brings examples from politicians’ *faux pas* in anniversaries of commemoration, such as Ronald Reagan’s and Helmut Kohl’s visit to the Bitburg cemetery, where Reagan compared the buried Waffen-SS with the victims of the Holocaust. The “failed performance” of this visit was strengthened by the fact that a visit to a concentration camp was added later (this is not mentioned in Elsaesser’s book) “to ensure parity (!)”⁵ and this provoked one of the major Jewish protests in the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (BRD). Yet Elsaesser also identifies similar “failed performances” (the literal translation of Freud’s *Fehlleistungen*) on the part of the Left. A compelling example is RAF’s distancing of itself from the Täter-Väter (perpetrator-fathers) generation. A crucial aspect of this distancing was their refusal to adapt to the philo-Semitic narrative of reconciliation. This was largely deployed by the conservative right as a means of exonerating itself from its own past and from allegations that the political structures which led to the Third Reich were still in place. Was RAF’s support for Palestine and its anti-Zionist rhetoric a symptom of latent fascism or of a broader reaction against the BRD’s collaboration with repressive regimes? Or was it a retroactive revival of the post-Auschwitz collective guilt?

Facile answers cannot be offered. This is precisely the merit of Elsaesser’s hermeneutical approach under the rubric of the *Fehlleistung*, because it allows

⁴ Thomas Elsaesser, *German Cinema—Terror And Trauma: Cultural Memory since 1945* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 8.

⁵ Barnett, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, 34.

him to point to a series of paradoxes that deny uniform interpretative responses. Such a contradiction is also brought to the fore when he explains how the history of the RAF is directly interrelated with media manipulation, since the radical left-wingers had no scruples in benefitting from the media-effects of “the society of the spectacle” so as to attract public attention and even to parallel the solitary confinement of their members with Auschwitz. In doing so, they aspired to expose the autocratic aspect of the BRD and to revive the ghost of the *Endlösung* (the final solution), which keeps on haunting Germany to the present, so as to argue that underneath the veneer of liberal democracy, the spectre of fascism was still alive.

Elsaesser is adept at showing that this burdened period in European history is an unfinished project, and he keeps on posing questions about the limits of representation when dealing with historical traumas. Then again, films about the Holocaust as well as about the RAF are still produced, and this insistence on commemorating the past might be the index of an inability to master it. Elsaesser makes an important (albeit inferred) periodization; films concerned with Germany’s traumatic past made during the years of the New German cinema differ from contemporary ones such as *Rosenstraße* (von Trotta: 2003) for two principal reasons. The first is that in the New German cinema there is a distinguishing absence of Jewish figures, while in the latter post-1990s period there is a tendency to focus on positive representations of the Jews. The second reason is that filmmakers like Fassbinder, Farocki, and Kluge were aware of the productive role of *Fehlleistungen* in representation. Failure to master the past could be a productive way of not foreclosing it and, as Elsaesser points out, these filmmakers deployed “narrative and stylistic devices in order to emphasise achievement and failure, achievement in failure.”⁶ This periodization can also be explained historically. On the one hand, the New German Cinema filmmakers operated in a period in which political activism was still strong enough, whereas films made in the post-1990s period reflect the shift from politics to “cultural memory.” The question that arises is: does this fixation with commemorating the past help us to comprehend it and avoid similar mistakes, or does it simply reproduce a culture of self-ingratiation?

⁶ Elsaesser, *German Cinema*, 25.

The second section of the book is titled “Parapractic Poetics in German Films and Cinema”. One chapter is devoted to some important films by Alexander Kluge, while the rest of the section concentrates on four important case studies: Konrad Wolf’s *Sterne* (*Stars*, 1959), Fassbinder’s *Die Dritte Generation* (*The Third Generation*, 1979), Herbert Achternbusch’s *Das letzte Loch* (*The Last Hole*, 1981), and Harun Farocki’s *Aufschub* (*Respite*, 2007). As already mentioned, what renders Elsaesser’s readings innovative and informative is the ways he historicises these objects and identifies their ability to endure through time, to pose different questions as well as to respond to contemporary political/historical crises; they thus force us to develop new readings, which acquire political significance for the present. While all these chapters in the second section produce novel readings of the films under discussion, I want to draw attention to the author’s remarkable reading of Wolf’s *Sterne* and Farocki’s *Aufschub*.

Sterne was a co-production between the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR) and Bulgaria, and it tells the story of Walter, a Nazi officer who falls in love with Ruth, a Greek-Jewish girl. More of a disillusioned intellectual than a warlike officer, Walter gets in touch with the Bulgarian resistance so as to save the girl from deportation to Auschwitz. When he arrives at the station, he realizes that he has been deceived about the train’s departure and he stares helplessly at the train carrying Jews to the concentration camp. In the end, he decides to join the Bulgarian communist resistance against Nazi occupation. Elsaesser sheds light on the film’s ability to “keep the past alive” mainly thanks to its changing political implications in different historical contexts. He explains how *Sterne* caused a diplomatic episode between the BRD and DDR, because the former appealed to the Hallstein Doctrine and demanded the film be shown as a Bulgarian and not a German entry in the Cannes film festival, in which it won the Grand Prize of the Jury in 1959. Meanwhile, in Bulgaria the film was banned on the grounds that it depicted German soldiers sympathetically, whereas the Bulgarians were portrayed as collaborators. In the BRD, the film was shown but censored; the finale which showed Walter joining the communist resistance had to be removed. Yet a testimonial to the film’s ability to produce heated reactions and debates was its second ban in Bulgaria after a television screening in 1989. The reason was that *Sterne* was considered to glorify the communist partisans, whilst the new post-communist Bulgarian regime wanted to cut all connections

with the socialist past. As Elsaesser convincingly argues, the film gains its potency exactly because of its continuing capacity to respond to Europe's historical contradictions.

In Harun Farocki's *Aufschub* the *Fehlleistung* is even stronger because it unwittingly indicates Europe's complacency in its own self-ingratiating positioning of the Holocaust as "the founding act" of European identity.⁷ The film consists of shots developed from footage made by Rudolf Berslauer (a Jew who was later murdered in Auschwitz) in Westerbork, a Dutch transit concentration camp for Jews, who were then transferred to death camps. This footage was also used in Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955). But here, Farocki does something different in the sense that he takes advantage of the lack of sound in the footage and interrupts the image continuity via the use of intertitles which are not rhetorical, but have the form of questions. At one point in the film, Berslauer registers a girl on a train wagon staring at the camera. As Elsaesser notes, for many years this girl was thought to be Jewish and her image has been reprinted in numerous magazines and book covers. Yet looking at this image retrospectively, we discover a new performed failure on the part of the European states, who proudly declare the "never again" mantra. At this stage, a passage from Elsaesser's book merits to be quoted:

Journalist Aad Wagenaar has shown in meticulous detail that the unknown girl actually has a name and a story. She was Settela Steinbach and came from the area around Aachen and Maastricht, on the German-Dutch border: "Anna Maria (Settela) Steinbach (Dec. 23, 1934–July 31, 1944) was a Dutch girl who was gassed in Auschwitz. For a long time she stood as an icon of the Dutch persecution of the Jews, until it was discovered in 1994 that she was not Jewish, as had previously been assumed, but rather belonged to the Sinti branch of the Romani people." Thus a chain of mistaken assumptions, unacknowledged appropriations, cultural prejudices and symbols taken out of context, but all the more effective for it—in short, a whole series of performative parapraxes—nevertheless leads to an important discovery and a vital recognition.

⁷ For further discussion, see Lothar Probst, "Founding Myths in Europe and the Role of the Holocaust," *New German Critique* 90 (2003), 45-58.

Hidden behind every train there can be a further transport, one genocide may obscure another, only to then reveal it in a new form. The images do not simply come to a standstill at some point in history; they travel with us—they accompany us and sometimes even overtake us.⁸

Indeed, one might venture to suggest that these “mistaken assumptions” gain a renewed significance when placed into a historical context, because they call into question Europe’s ability to learn from the mistakes of the past. A telling index is Nikola Sarkozy’s expulsion of Roma populations from France, or the continuous mistreatment and discrimination against the Roma in Western and Eastern Europe.⁹ But this image of Anna Maria (Settela) Steinbach looking us in the eyes while we witness some of her last moments also reminds us retroactively that the BRD refused to acknowledge the crimes against Gypsies, arguing that “all measures taken against Roma before 1943 were legitimate official measures against persons committing criminal acts, not the result of policy driven by racial prejudice.”¹⁰ When the BRD parliament decided to acknowledge them in 1979, most of those eligible for reparations were already dead, a convenient and indeed “low-cost” solution.

The vigour of all the case studies discussed in Elsaesser’s book is their ability to open out new fields of inquiry when dealing with the traumatic European past. This can be attributed to their refusal to see the past as a “finished business,” and as the examples of *Sterne* and *Aufschub* eloquently demonstrate, they can also challenge the cultures of commemoration of the present.

The last section of the book is titled “Trauma Theory Reconsidered” and here Elsaesser questions the orthodox cultures of commemoration and the institutionalisation of memory surrounding the Holocaust. But he also takes issue with post-1990s films about the Holocaust, including *Rosenstraße*, exactly because of their lack of the necessary ambiguity that could afford them some

⁸ Elsaesser, 164.

⁹ See, for instance, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/driving-out-the-unwanted-sarkozy-s-war-against-the-roma-a-717324.html> and <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/27/hungary-roma-living-in-fear>.

¹⁰ For further information, see the Holocaust Encyclopedia: <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005219>.

degree of political responsibility. But what is questioned here (and indeed this is more forcefully clarified in the book's postscript) is whether this culture of remembrance, the emphasis on survival (which indeed is a standardised trope in the majority of films on the Holocaust which are content to approach the subject ethically rather than politically) are tropes that can help us place the trauma of the fascist past in a historical context. Yet such a task presupposes that we go beyond "the ethical turn" in the study of politics, history, and indeed in the Humanities. In contrast, approaching the Holocaust from the universalizing perspective of "radical evil" obfuscates questions of agency, such as who has the right to commemorate, as well as political questions that are conveniently suppressed when approaching such a sensitive issue morally rather than politically.

In an influential essay written in 1959 and titled "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," Theodor Adorno argued that "the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken."¹¹ Adorno refused to subscribe to the post-war mottos that fascism belonged to the past and in one of the most influential passages of his essay he identifies the remnants of fascism in post-war democracies, arguing that the "objective conditions" that led to the emergence of fascism are still in place. For Adorno, the paradox in capitalist liberal democracy is that on the one hand it preaches human rights and the right to freedom, but on the other it expects that individuals must adapt to a set of indisputable economic conditions. In these terms, the prerequisite for the enjoyment of the benefits of liberal democracy is nothing but the "renunciation of subjectivity," a fascist stratagem *tout court*. Adorno's essay gains significant relevance for the present, perhaps because this contemporary culture of commemoration has depoliticized any discussions of fascism and the Holocaust. Meanwhile, the almost universal replacement of democracy by the market and the lack of virulent political alternatives have led to the increase of neo-fascist parties in Europe, clearly demonstrating the continent's inability to deal with the structural conditions that led to the emergence of fascism in the first place.

¹¹ Theodor Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past", in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 89-103.

One can easily refute these points, relegating them to the status of knee-jerk leftism. Yet Adorno's argument is not far from Franklin D. Roosevelt's definition of fascism: "The first truth is that the liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than their democratic state itself. That, in its essence, is fascism—ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or by any other controlling private power."¹² Speaking of private power or, as the neoliberals idiomatically name it, "market forces," we might be somewhat quick to forget that fascism was the product of the dialectical conflict between capital and labour.¹³ Yet this conflict is far from being resolved in the present and one might also easily forget that a number of corporations (many of them active in the present)¹⁴ benefited tremendously from the Holocaust; as Heiner Müller rightly suggests, "people talk mostly about the animals in SS uniforms, but forget the animals seated on the board of directors."¹⁵ According to Müller, failure to see fascism as "a product of the market economy" perpetuates the structures that led to its genesis. In this context, he proposes that the *arche* and *telos* of politics and representation are to stop treating the past as a museum piece. As he says: "Expelling art and history from the museum means tearing them away from death and establishing the discourse of the living. Only the production of ever newer perspectives on the old makes it at all possible to live. Everything else turns one into a zombie."¹⁶

Elsaesser's book addresses (mainly parapractically) these contradictions when questioning whether this post-1990s engagement with the past has been productive. As he characteristically says at one point, "the 'concentrationary'

¹² Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Message to Congress on Curbing Monopolies", <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=15637>.

¹³ This is brilliantly elaborated in Peter Weiss's influential novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ For further discussion, see Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, and Otto Kirchheimer, *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany*, ed. Raffaele Laudani (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013). See, also, the remarkable activist documentary *FASCISM INC* (2014), available at http://infowarproductions.com/fascism_inc/.

¹⁵ Müller, *Plays, Poetry, Prose*, 149-50.

¹⁶ Müller, *Plays, Poetry, Prose*, 136.

mindset is still very much with us”.¹⁷ Reading *German Cinema—Terror And Trauma* makes one want to delve more deeply into the *Fehlleistungen* in other German films and into the “failed performances” of present political conditions. Amongst other reasons, the book is remarkable because it makes us rethink questions of representation. Elsaesser insightfully intimates that unlike Wolf, Farocki, Kluge, Fassbinder, and Achternbusch, there will always be someone like Fassbinder’s character Fricke—mentioned at the beginning of this review—who will prefer to trivialise the Holocaust for the sake of official awards and “universal” acclaim.

¹⁷ Elsaesser, *German Cinema*, 255.