Mind-Game as Zeitgeist: Reading Hollywood, America, and Contemporary Times Through its Popular Culture

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Abstract:

Thomas Elsaesser's posthumous publication *The Mind-Game Film: Distributed Agency, Time Travel, and Productive Pathology* unites 12 articles of his most influential and intriguing thoughts on contemporary complex Hollywood cinema. The book offers a kaleidoscopic view on the heterogeneous corpus of films that Elsaesser perceives as symptomatic of institutional, political, ideological, and socio-cultural concerns of America and the world. In this, Elsaesser does not merely analyze mind-game films, but canvases the U.S. American zeitgeist through its popular culture.

Mind-Game als Zeitgeist: Ein Blick auf Hollywood, Amerika und die Gegenwart durch die Populärkultur

German Abstract:

Thomas Elsaessers posthume Publikation *The Mind-Game Film. Distributed Agency, Time Travel, and Productive Pathology* vereint in 12 Artikeln seine einflussreichsten und faszinierendsten Gedanken zum zeitgenössischen komplexen Film Hollywoods. Das Buch bietet einen kaleidoskopischen Blick auf den heterogenen Filmkorpus, den Elsaesser als symptomatisch für institutionelle, politische, ideologische und soziokulturelle Belange Amerikas und der Welt sieht und zeichnet damit den U.S.-amerikanischen Zeitgeist anhand seiner Populärkultur nach.

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Thomas Elsaesser's scholarship on cinema has been widely influential in the field of film studies, and has shaped the way we approach media analysis today. In his writing, he reflects on film history and theory, the influence of new media, and contemporary Hollywood. *The Mind-Game Film: Distributed Agency, Time Travel, and Productive Pathology* is a collection of Elsaesser's most influential and intriguing thoughts on a tendency in filmmaking that film scholars have grappled with for years. Published posthumously, the book unites 12 articles by Elsaesser, some previously published, others unpublished and in service of this volume, that illuminate the contemporary trend of complex cinema, or, as Elsaesser prefers to call them, mind-game films.

The first chapter, "On Mind-Game Films as Tipping Points," opens up a kaleidoscopic view on this contemporary tendency in Hollywood filmmaking. Elsaesser does not intend to offer a classification or definition; rather, he examines the phenomenon in all its facets, "the industrial-institutional challenges and constraints facing Hollywood, and the broader *epistemic horizon* within which American cinema survives and indeed thrives in the 21st century" (p. 24). The first chapter is dedicated to previous research on the heterogenous group of films and streamlines it into three approaches: understanding them in line with the conventions of classical Hollywood (defended by film scholars David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson); as hybrids combining cinematic practices with the logic of video games (mainly linked to Lev Manovich); and as cognitive brain candies following a reception-oriented approach (proposed by Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen). Elsaesser adds the notion of "*mind-game films [as] Hollywood's contemporary meta-cinema*" (p. 45) to these approaches, conceding that these films "mimetically enact and reflexively allegorize the material and technological [and, as later

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argued, political and ideological] conditions that make them possible" (p. 58) — a claim that is present in the whole volume.

Throughout the book, Elsaesser moves through some of the field's favorite complex films, such as *Groundhog Day* (1993), *Inception* (2010), and David Lynch's LA Trilogy (1997, 2001, 2006); and others that have not been readily identified as belonging to this tendency, such as *Argo* (2012), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). This broad understanding of the mind-game film allows Elsaesser to develop and refine a compendium of concepts to analyze the diverse corpus in the progression of the chapters. The first of these concepts describes the notion of productive pathologies as mainly connected to addiction, paranoia, and trauma. The new normal, according to Elsaesser, is to be traumatized (p. 164), and what usually classifies as a disorder becomes a survival skill for contemporary times: Idiosyncratic structures and characters reflect a life with contradictions and no need for a coherent identity or narrative (see esp. chapters 3, 5, and 9). Another addition to the analysis of film is the concept of parapraxis, Elsaesser's adaptation of Freud's *Fehlleistung*, which describes how mind-game films scatter "clues of retroactively meaningful 'mistakes,' irritations, non-sequiturs, reversals" (p. 180). This form of telling reveals narratives that are told in that they remain untold (see especially chapters 5, 6, 9). Finally, the concept of agency is a recurrent concern in the book's exploration of (cinematic) mind-games. In connection to time-travel films, Elsaesser observes that the very idea of time travel promises agency, but the logical paradoxes governing the narrative require what he terms "the ethics of time travel" (p. 140–41), that problemate, even negate this very agency. The continuation of this idea, the concept of distributed agency, understands protagonists as entangled in a complex network, where power relations are diffuse (see especially chapters 2, 4, 7, 8, and 11). Importantly, Elsaesser does not only identify these concepts in the films themselves, but sees them as symptomatic of larger sociocultural concerns, thereby politicizing films that are often considered a mere formal-structural phenomenon.

In the first text dedicated specifically to the mind-game film (chapter 3), a text originally published in Warren Buckland's edited volume on *Puzzle Films, Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), Elsaesser raises questions, that will guide his future research: "I prefer to think of [mind-game films] as a phenomenon, or maybe [...] a 'certain tendency' in contemporary cinema. But if it is a tendency, in which direction does

it point? And if it is a phenomenon, what is it symptomatic of?" (p. 90). In the concluding chapter (chapter 12), the question of mind-game films' symptomatic and symbolic character is followed by a tentative answer: "the mind-game film in its ideal form is the allegorical *mise-en-abyme* of the contemporary world" (p. 309). In his accustomed philosophical way, Thomas Elsaesser's *The Mind-Game Film* is more than a negotiation of a tendency in filmmaking: It is a study of the 'hows' and 'whys' of Hollywood film, an economic, political, ideological, institutional, and socio-cultural investigation that reflects on the question "What is/was cinema good for?" (p. 247). His deliberations on a conclusive answer are thought-provoking and illuminating, enabling a perspectival shift that accounts for the larger implications of (mind-game) films and contemporary Hollywood. In this, Elsaesser does not merely analyze a cinematic phenomenon, but canvases the U.S. American zeitgeist through its popular culture.