

*NOTES ON CREATIVE PRACTICE RESEARCH  
IN THE AGE OF NEOLIBERAL HOPELESSNESS,  
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1. THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE

It must be quite perplexing for non-UK scholars to look at what is happening in contemporary British Higher Education. All that British academics seem to talk about involves weird terms like 'impact' and three-letter acronyms (TLAs) like REF (the research excellent framework) and TEF (the teaching excellence framework).

For those who do not know, these 'frameworks' to a certain extent decide the fate of British universities, since how well one does in these tests determines the amount of money that a university will receive from the government over the coming period, thereby helping it economically to survive. In short order, the REF system would seem to favour the richer universities over the poorer universities, since the former can afford to give more time to their staff in order to carry out research. Furthermore, as has widely been contended, the issue of impact, which is a central component of the REF and which is measured by the extent to which academics can make their research relevant to and perhaps even useful for non-academic, preferably industrial, organisations (i.e. to what extent academics can help other organisations to make money), skews naturally towards the sciences. Indeed, if part of one's job involves the critique of capitalism (as we might characterise some parts of the humanities), then how one will positively impact (i.e. perpetuate) a capitalist society is up for question (notwithstanding the impact created by encouraging industry to be more 'ethical').

This is not to mention the TEF, which rates universities via a link to another TLA that often passes the lips of academics working in the UK, namely the NSS, or National Student Survey. The latter is one of the more influential league tables that is constructed annually, and in which universities are rated according to the quality of the academic half of the student experience. Little matter that students, who on the whole will only have had

involvement with their own institution, have nothing against which to compare their experiences (except perhaps their own expectations). And little matter, then, that students will likely rate their experiences based upon expectations created as a result of things like league tables: going to a university that lies towards the bottom of a league table? Well, then, you probably won't get particularly good teaching because you did not do well enough at school in order to go to a high ranking university—so you might as well assume that what you'll get at your low ranking university is teaching that is low ranking... not least because you have nothing against which to compare it. And let us not even mention the possibility that those who struggled in school, but who wish to go to university because a degree might well help them to improve their lot in the world (or simply to have fun for three years before the shit really begins), might well also struggle at university—and who as a result of that struggle will not feel inclined to give to their institution a good score, while those with excellent educations and who sail through elite universities can pat themselves on the back by saying that everything that they experienced was excellent.

Now, I can attest from personal experience that the teaching and the research in film studies is basically the equal at low-ranking institutions as it is at high-ranking ones as far as the personnel is concerned—and this is logically the case since there are far too many people qualified for the job and who are looking for work these days, meaning that even low-ranking institutions will have excellent teachers and researchers. This is perhaps mitigated by the way in which staff at poorer institutions can be overburdened as a result of necessarily low staff-to-student ratios (as few staff members and as many students as possible), with the growing number of visiting lecturers paid only by the hour (as opposed to full-time staff with secure jobs) only furthering the problem because in spite of their almost certainly excellent levels of expertise and teaching skills, they simply are not paid enough by their institution to give to students the experience that the latter believe their money demands/ deserves, or at the very least that both staff and students would desire (which is not to mention that they must often work numerous jobs simultaneously). My point, then, is that the staff are not the cause of perceived differences in quality between universities, a point to which I shall return below.

Indeed, if what changes most from year to year at a university is not the teaching staff (or the curriculum) so much as the students, then any annual student survey is as much if not more a reflection of a particular annual cohort than it is a genuine reflection of the ins-

tution and its staff. And if a cohort is poor (economically and perhaps also in terms of the quality of education that they have received prior to university, which, to be clear, is not the same as their level of intelligence), then the neoliberalisation of higher education in the UK seems directly to result in social conservatism, whereby the poor get poorer and the rich get richer, and whereby the REF and the TEF ensure that low-ranking and poorer universities get punished while high-ranking and typically richer universities get rewarded—even as the poorer university tries to bring about social mobility for those who need it most. Indeed, students from poorer backgrounds become increasingly indebted in order to study—meaning that the social mobility that universities should promise results in the opposite. That is, their debt leads to social immobility. Or at least this is the case until the poorer universities crumble under the weight of their own debts, leading to a more ignorant population that is easier to control, and at which point the government will have to come up with another scheme to create popular debt that it can then use to pay off international deficits, and so on (perhaps by offering dogshit mortgages to people as per the build-up to the 2008 economic crash, or by creating military institutions).

Ought a staff member to care about and to make it their job to ensure that students are both enjoying and learning from university, while at the same time through their research trying to further knowledge in their field—and to disseminate that knowledge as far and wide as they can, so that it is transferred out of the academy and into the general population? The short answer is of course yes—and rare is it that I've met any higher educator who does not agree with me. Nonetheless, when crises are created in universities, as per the REF and the TEF, then crisis must of course be managed. Hence the rise of the manager within British higher education—whose job (well paid or otherwise) is basically consistently to remind staff members that they must care about their job – and to provide statistics that generally seem to demonstrate that they do not care quite enough about their job, but the accumulation of which statistics clearly demonstrates that the managers care enough about their job, which apparently becomes to gather means to demonstrate that staff members don't care enough about their job. That is, the rise of the manager becomes a system of bad faith, whereby the measurement of all things within the university means that staff members are constantly being monitored and have to answer for more or less every move that they make in terms of teaching and research.

Do these managers themselves get consistently rated? Only inasmuch as they can blame staff members for anything that goes wrong or does not receive a good score. Do

the students get rated? Only inasmuch as they get graded, which in turn they can blame on staff members if they do not like their grades. In spite of my assertion above that staff members are basically of a high standard across all universities, the result is that teaching researchers get told from both sides (managers and students) that everything that goes wrong within the university is basically their fault. The inmates run the asylum. And small wonder, then, that there is grade inflation in order to make one's life more liveable. That is, what is supposed to result in one doing a better job in fact results in one doing a worse job because of the unmanageable nature of the emotional and psychological damage that is done to educators who are told that they are shit even as they try simply to follow their belief as best they can that everyone deserves an education, and as they try to share and to create knowledge in the numerous different ways that they can.

Indeed, if students who struggled at school are supposed not to struggle (or even be challenged) at university for fear of them giving to that university a low score in the student survey, then by definition standards become *lower* at university than they were at school. Education, in other words, goes backwards as students are transformed into clients who can demand what they wish, and as universities that no longer receive so much support from the government struggle to stay afloat—not least to pay off the debts accrued to install the facilities that will make the university attractive to would-be students, even if a university also wants to hold on to the vision and mission of providing education to students from all sectors of society and thus to help bring about social mobility and perhaps even social change.

The same impoverishment, alas, holds true for research. The REF sees UK academics have their published work rated in a star system that ranges from unclassified (a senseless definition of published work that “does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment”—i.e. research that is not research), up through one star (“quality that is recognised nationally”), two star (“quality that is recognised internationally”), three star (“quality that is internationally excellent”) and four star (“quality that is world-leading”). Setting aside the way in which the REF system basically spits in the face of existing peer review systems (however fallible they are) as it imposes its own ratings on published work (meaning it is about as reliable as a journalist's opinion of a film, a comparison to which I shall return), except that contrary to peer review, the REF rating is final (one cannot rework and resubmit an essay for REF that one might after rejection from peer reviewers).

Furthermore, it is worth noting how these definitions do not rate the work but *the quality of the work* (i.e. the research is not world-leading, but the quality of the research is world-leading). One of the upshots of this nuance is that research excellence in the UK is not so much about publishing excellent work, as about how one bigs up that work. That is, the REF becomes an exercise not in research but in self-promotion. Indeed, I have seen it explained various times at sessions on how to deal with the REF (while also having it explained to me that this is a reason why one of my pieces of work was only deemed worthy of two stars, as we shall see later), that what one must do to achieve a good score is to explain in one's research essay why it is worthy of a three or a four star rating. What this means is that many essays and books that come out of UK universities have within them curious passages, typically early on, that in hyperbolic language explain that what they are doing is world-leading and truly original research. In other words, the REF begins to infuse the style of British academia, meaning that outsiders to that system will look at the work and ask why it has all of these strange turns of phrase and tics. And they will realise that the reason why UK-based authors are doing this weird self-promotion stuff is because of their national rating system. Meaning that what is supposed to be world-leading in fact becomes increasingly parochial, since it is written not to disseminate knowledge, but to satisfy the rating system of a national measurement. Research, in other words, goes backwards.

But more than this. As many film reviewers have got it wrong regarding what constitutes an enduring classic, with many of the greats being films that were relatively neglected upon their release (let us name *La règle du jeu* [*Rules of the Game*, 1939] and *Citizen Kane* [1941] as two examples), so might REF reviewers get it wrong regarding what constitutes a great or enduring piece of research—or certainly one that is ahead of its time. Indeed, the immediacy of the REF system leads not to the development of quality work, but to the academic equivalent of the box office smash that rakes in a lot of money on its opening weekend. The small and the fragile are not protected, but are positively stamped upon in this system. For, in order to manage the REF, what nigh every UK university does nowadays is annually to submit staff members' work to a 'mock REF' panel, which guesses in advance what score that work would get from the actual REF panel. When work is deemed not good enough (which is to say when it does not get at least a three star rating), then it is discounted and discarded from the would-be REF submission, and the author

has to go back to the drawing board in order to come up with work that is of a perceived good enough quality.

Forget about the emotional and psychological damage of being told once again that your work is basically not good enough—even though it has already been published, often via a peer review system. More important to understand is that this emotional and psychological damage is built into this system. For, if I am grading someone else's work for a mock REF, I could just be really generous and give it four stars in a gesture to show that we all work hard and do our best and that all research is relevant and valid, even if some of it is more obviously so. But this will not help anyone out in the actual REF—and so I am encouraged always to err on the side of conservative grading, just in case I get it wrong. Since the university cannot risk putting something in for the real REF that only got two stars in the mock REF, then the system itself leads to lower predicted and in some senses lower actual scores (in spite of the persistent myth, sometimes denied, that the formula is that a book gets four stars, a journal article three stars, and a book chapter two stars). Where the UK's American cousins are known for their hyperbolic letters of recommendation and truly unbelievable scores on their student evaluations, the UK rating system, combined with the dour conservatism of the UK mentality, leads to the opposite. Indeed, where Americans and the British increasingly both undertake grade inflation for their students, the REF is more likely to lead to a sort of "grade deflation" for academics. And so, UK academics are basically made to feel shit about themselves around the clock (since the job never ends as one is always trying not only to do a better job, but also to explain how one is doing a better job via the reams of bureaucratic forms that one is required at all points of time to fill in).

There is more yet. In 2015, I published an essay on Lav Diaz's *Melancholia* (2008) in a book called *Slow Cinema*, edited by Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge.<sup>1</sup> I submitted this to a mock REF panel and got two stars for the essay. The feedback said that the essay was of "[r]elatively limited significance in that the piece does not make wider connections or indicate how this reading extends existing understanding." Given that the essay appears in an edited collection on slow cinema, it is not necessarily the job of a chapter author to give its wider connections; indeed, if this were a requirement, then every essay in the collection would have to repeat the same point about how significant slow cinema is in the contemporary world. Furthermore, the feedback does not suggest that the essay does

not extend existing understanding (which it does, since to the best of my knowledge it is the first academic essay to be published on the film); it simply says that the essay does not indicate how it extends existing understanding. That is, the essay does not waste words bigging itself up, but is conversely punished not for being a bad essay, but for not explaining to the reader how it is a good essay. Good essays do not just get on with being good; they spend some time explaining how they are good.

What we have here, then, is not simply a case of how the essay in an edited collection likely is going to be rated more lowly—simply because the editors will be the ones to give the contextual explanation of the book's focus. Nor do we just have in this feedback the implied sense that the close reading of a single film will also diminish in stature (even if good) because the essay "does not make wider connections." What I want to highlight is that de Luca and Jorge's book was nominated for the 2017 best edited collection award from the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS). And yet, here it is with a low-scoring two star essay inside it. Not only might my essay be the reason why the collection did not win that award, but the situation points to how in the future research will be measured not on the mock REF and subsequent REF score that it gets, but actually on *predicted future scores*, such that no embarrassing and award-depriving two star work will ever come out. That is, we will have to pitch our research from the moment of conceptualisation in order then to be authorised actually to undertake it, meaning that research and the development of knowledge become teleological exercises in which knowledge is understood before it has been produced, i.e. knowledge becomes the reaffirmation of existing knowledge and the systems that produce it, rather than novel knowledge and ways of thinking and learning.

I think regularly that I would be better off outside of academia, while also having sporadic, depression-inspired fantasies both of dying so that I no longer have to do my job and of just walking away with a semi-dramatic mic drop depending on whether a manager says to me any of the trigger phrases that I have set for myself. But worse than my own personal welfare is the welfare of higher education in the UK. We are not there yet (and it would be rum for me to suggest that my prediction about giving future pre-predicted REF scores before the research has even been undertaken is anything other than speculative, even if the mock REF is precisely a prediction about future REF scores and not an actual measure of what score a piece of work will get). But we do seem to be heading in that direction.

And yet, I still have not finished. For, another piece of work that I have published is a video-essay on the sexuality of space in the journal *[in]Transition*. This piece of work was also awarded two stars by a mock REF panel—this despite the (published) peer review describing the work as “bear[ing] a more ambitious and multi-layered poetic agenda” than Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* (1989). Riggs’ film is considered a true classic of queer cinema, while a website called *The Greatest Films* also places it as the 436<sup>th</sup> greatest film of all time.<sup>2</sup> The reason for bringing this up is to suggest that a mock REF panel (and perhaps even the REF panel itself) does not necessarily know what it is looking for or even at when it comes to scholars producing audiovisual work, since apparently only work that would come in roughly the top four hundred films of all time would be worth three or four stars. *Citizen Kane* would likely get three stars, maybe scraping four stars if it was lucky and the REF panel decided that day to be generous.

I stand in the relatively luxurious position of producing a lot of research, of which enough is perceived to be of three or four star quality, that I am not under too much pressure to somehow improve my work. Indeed, I have even been told that I produce too much work by my institution, which would prefer me to produce less and better work—even though enough of my work is good enough for REF purposes. This has led me to start publishing work under pseudonyms (a ploy carried out also for the purposes of challenging the REF’s implicit cult of the author), while it also makes me worry about how the system refuses to respect how different researchers simply work at different rates and to each their own (at a time when we are conversely encouraged in a theoretically laudable but actually problematic way to fetishise difference in the seminar room—this being laudable because we must challenge our own preconceptions and continue to learn to communicate our knowledge in different ways and to different people, but also problematic since it basically gives *carte blanche* to students to complain about anything that displeases them—meaning once again that it is always the higher educator’s fault, and their mental well-being can go hang if the client is put out at any given moment in time).

Forced to kneel before these star systems as if they were not human and fallible, contemporary UK academics thus also have bad faith in a system that has no faith in them: under constant surveillance and measurement, with no means to answer back except by mental breakdown or departure, we are forced to accept (i.e. to acknowledge as legitimate) these systems that crush the possible pleasure of life now (I mean, no one is actually

supposed to enjoy their work, right?) for the purposes of controlling the future. We are forced not just to eat shit, but to smile about it, since no one wants to see an unhappy shit-eater. Who cares that a diet of shit will lead only to shitty shit as opposed to solid and sturdy stools of knowledge? Indeed, if you produce and eat ever more shitty shit, no one cares, as long as you are smiling about it—as long as you are saying that you are producing really good shit, whether you believe it to be true or not, and even though it is not true. In this way, drivel emerges as the standard of academic work as everyone is forced to accept a monolithic conception of research quality driven by metrics and the idiocracy's race to the bottom. The more drivel-like the shit is, the more it will stick to those smiling teeth, thereby functioning as evidence of its quality. Come on! Sew your mouth up to your neighbour's ass and join the human centipede of UK higher education!

## 2. THE PERSISTENCE OF ELSAESSER

The foregoing section is designed (perhaps hyperbolically and certainly via broad brush strokes) to give a sense of what neoliberal hopelessness is or might be such that Agnieszka Piotrowska decided to organise a conference on that theme with the help of Priyanka Verma, and which had an especial emphasis on creative practice research, or the category of work under which might fall the audiovisual essay-making described above (if you can't make *Citizen Kane*, or rather a proper blockbuster that has immediate box office returns, then you might as well give up).

Taking place in May 2018, the conference was inspired by Piotrowska's experiences as a simultaneous theorist and practitioner, as well featuring a screening of her zero-budget feature film, *Escape* (2016), co-directed with Joe Njagu, which explores how Freudian ideas/*film noir* can function in a contemporary Zimbabwean context. The conference featured numerous contributions from an array of scholars, the majority of which are based in the UK, but many of whom are not. In particular the conference featured screenings and performances that bridged the gap between practice and research, with highlights including Timothy Jarvis' "Day's Horse Descend: Reflections on Radical Writing Processes," Jyoti Mistry, Lindiwe Dovey and Nobunye Levin doing an untitled video performance on South African history, in particular as seen through the eyes of women, Catherine Grant's keynote on contemporary video-essay work, and Roberta Mock performatively engaging

with the concept of failure in relation to stand-up comedy. Numerous practitioners discussed and showed their work, while the issues of the REF and (to a lesser extent) the TEF repeatedly reared their heads during discussions both in and around the conference's panels. However, forasmuch as the conference was a wonderful example of rich and vibrant difference from and thus resistance to the typical conference that can sometimes feel homogeneous and repetitive, I should wish in the second half of this piece to focus on the contributions of another keynote speaker at the conference, namely Thomas Elsaesser.

For, the conference played host to a screening of Elsaesser's debut film, *Die Sonneninsel* (*The Sun Island*, 2017), which film scholars may have noticed has been doing a round of campus screenings over the past year or so, while Elsaesser also gave a keynote talk in which he outlined the perceived benefits of a concept that he described as "tactical compliance." The aim here, then, is to work through what tactical compliance might mean in the face of the torrent of shit that I described in the last section—and in some senses to take issue with the concept in terms of how it might actually apply to someone working within contemporary UK higher education, to which Elsaesser does not currently belong, despite studying in the UK and spending many years working at the University of East Anglia, as well as two stints at the University of Cambridge. Nonetheless, that Elsaesser has basically avoided the neoliberalisation of UK Higher Education may to a certain extent render comprehensible both the concept and my resistance to it. In order to do this, I wish to situate Elsaesser's current creative work, namely *Die Sonneninsel*, within the context of his theoretical work, in particular his understanding of the so-called *Persistence of Hollywood* (2012), which itself springs perhaps from his contribution to Vivian Sobchack's edited collection on *The Persistence of History* (1997). The aim is not to produce an *ad hominem* "attack" on Elsaesser and his work, but to understand tactical compliance as a means towards persistence, while also relating persistence to systems of power. In other words, the ideas of Elsaesser will be linked to Elsaesser-as-idea (as author, as filmmaker), with no real concern for Elsaesser-as-man (if that is how he would define himself and/or if that is what Elsaesser is).

The reason why what follows will necessarily seem to conflate the personal with the political is because *Die Sonneninsel* is in some senses a deeply personal film. The film is primarily about the rehabilitation of the reputation of the filmmaker's grandfather, Martin Elsaesser, an architect who played a significant role in the design of Frankfurt between 1925 and 1932, and whose most famous work, the city's *Großmarkthalle*, or Central Market,

was to be destroyed to make way for the new headquarters of the European Central Bank in the first part of the twenty first century. However, the film also is a consideration of the Elsaessers' family history—including perhaps most significantly the relationship between the filmmaker's grandmother, Liesel, and landscape designer Leberecht Migge. Migge, whom Elsaesser has referred to elsewhere as "something like the Grandfather of the German Green movement,"<sup>3</sup> is the person mainly responsible for the titular Sun Island, which started out in 1932 as a kind of project for sustainable living, where inhabitants would be able to survive without the interference of the modern world. In this sense, the island could even be read as a sort of utopian escape from the political turmoil that Germany was undergoing from the 1930s onwards, and during which time the bulk of the film's story takes place.

Indeed, Martin Elsaesser finds himself losing favour under National Socialism, while Migge also is something of an outsider as a result of the radical nature of his ideas of conservation, including the *Siedlung* or growing house that exists on the island. Migge then dies in 1935 while in Liesel's company, despite having a wife and eight children who live in Worpswede. When the war starts, Liesel is almost overwhelmed by the amount of work that is required to maintain Migge's project, but she gets help from Trudel, a young woman who eventually becomes the wife of Hans Peter Elsaesser, Martin and Liesel's son, and the filmmaker's father.

Not only is Hans Peter the filmmaker's father. In some senses, he is himself also the filmmaker since *Die Sonneninsel* comprises in large part of home movie footage shot by Hans Peter of life on the Sun Island and elsewhere. Thomas Elsaesser thus arranges the material, which also includes photographs, contemporary film footage and more, while giving to the film a voice over that allows him to reflect semi-theoretically and semi-personally on events from the 1920s through the 1940s and up until the present day, where finally Martin Elsaesser's legacy is recognised, and a testament to the architect is created in the ECB building that stands on and incorporates some aspects of the earlier Central Market.

In a relatively simple fashion, *Die Sonneninsel* is a campaign film that seeks to save Martin Elsaesser from oblivion and to restore to him a place in German history. More than this, the film is an exploration of the home movie archive, while also demonstrating how the Elsaesser family was connected via Migge to the incipient green movement. An essay-

film and a documentary, the film equally explores Germany's history during the war, since while various members of the Elsaesser family served in the German military during the war (with two of Migge's sons joining the Nazi party before being killed on the Eastern Front in 1944), Trudel was also a half-Jewess (not devout), meaning that the film in some senses is also (or could lay claim to being) about the saving of Jews during the war. Finally, the film is very clearly a treatment of family and the role that images can play in creating a sense of family, lending to the film a tinge of melodrama that at no point is forced upon the viewer.

In fact, the film seeks at all points in time to force as little on the viewer as possible, with the filmmaker's position often seeming absent, in spite of the seemingly personal nature of the film, and in spite of the filmmaker's own voice being that which we hear most on the soundtrack, with the filmmaker also occasionally appearing on the image track, e.g. to wander around the Sun Island today, placing his hands on a dilapidated building in order to feel the history of this *lieu de mémoire*. Indeed, the film seems to want to be deliberately ambiguous, with Elsaesser during his keynote claiming that he wants audiences, insofar as they are willing, to "make their own film out of mine."<sup>4</sup> And yet, *Die Sonneninsel* also takes care to maintain within it claims to dealing with all of the major issues of German history and the global present in a politically correct fashion: ecology, architecture, war, Holocaust, history, family and more. In some senses this makes the film fascinating. But in other senses, it seems that the film wants to be the sort of documentary equivalent of the access-for-all blockbuster that Elsaesser feels is characteristic of contemporary Hollywood: deliberately ambiguous, it can be understood and taken in many different ways in a bid to reach as wide an audience as possible. Or, put in terms that are less compliant, it says everything, but ultimately it means nothing. This ability to have no properly identifiable position on anything, and yet to be able to make reference to it all, is what Elsaesser characterises as one of the key aspects of *the persistence of Hollywood*.<sup>5</sup>

*Die Sonneninsel* is clearly not a Hollywood blockbuster, but we shall return later to what it is—and how this relates to tactical compliance as we are yet to develop it.<sup>6</sup> For the time being, though, we might read the film against another piece of Elsaesser's work that is framed not by the persistence of Hollywood, but by the persistence of history in cinema, namely his essay in Vivian Sobchack's edited collection of the same name.<sup>7</sup> In that (typically wide-ranging) essay, Elsaesser explores the treatment of the Second World War

by post-war European filmmakers, taking in a range of ideas that might help us to understand *The Sun Island*. Firstly, the film is in some sense an example of what Elsaesser refers to as *Alltagsgeschichte*, or the “history of everyday life,” in that the film records and reports the lives of relatively common folk (the Elsaesser family is *bourgeois*) over an extended period of time.<sup>8</sup> Here, “Nazism... [is] a daily reality,” as opposed to a subject that has to be treated with any sense of hysteria or melodrama.<sup>9</sup> Quoting Martin Broszat, Elsaesser says that the genre functions as a means for Germans “to be able to talk about the ‘Third Reich’ as ‘the German people’s own history’ and thus for individuals to take responsibility for what had occurred.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, the genre is considered in relation to the war to be “apologetic in tendency if not intent.”<sup>11</sup> That is, the *Alltagsgeschichte* normalises Nazism, offering an apology for it in the sense of a defence or an excuse rather than in the sense of saying sorry for taking part in it (Nazism was everyday reality and so of course everyday people got caught up in it). Given that the Elsaesser family connections with Nazism are glossed over without much investigation or comment, there is a loose sense in which *Die Sonneninsel* might also contain elements of this genre.

Earlier in the essay, Elsaesser invokes Jean Baudrillard to suggest that the German “retro-cinema” of the 1970s and 1980s that looked back at the war can be explained as follows: “[t]he attraction of a return to history as story and image was the illusion it could give of a personal or national destiny: a need fascism had tried to gratify on a collective scale.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the desire to mine one’s own history involves an attempt to give meaning to one’s life (to give it a destiny), a tendency for desiring meaning that fascism itself has so skilfully explored. Indeed, the perceived “affinity between fascism and show business”<sup>13</sup> functions as an ongoing thread throughout Elsaesser’s essay, which soon turns its attention to Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (USA, 1993), which was critiqued by Claude Lanzmann, among others, for offering a sentimentalised, middle-of-the-road and typically American perspective on the Holocaust. Why should the middle-of-the-road nature of the film be surprising, though, Elsaesser asks, before going on to suggest that Spielberg chooses “for the cinema and its history: whether this makes him a postmodernist, and whether a postmodern stance makes him necessarily either morally or historically irresponsible towards the Holocaust, is a point worth pondering.”<sup>14</sup> But either way, Spielberg has a “typically postmodern hubris, namely the faith that the cinema can redeem the

past, rescue the real, and even rescue that which was never real"<sup>15</sup>—a perspective wholly different to that of Lanzmann, who has signally more modernist tendencies.

Perhaps one can see where I am going with this. Hans Peter and Thomas Elsaesser alike document their family in a bid to redeem the past, to rescue the real and perhaps even to rescue that which was never real, namely an island of sun during times of darkness. Perhaps this is because instead of telling a story, "an activity closer to therapeutic practice has taken over, with acts of re-telling, re-membling, and repeating all pointing in the direction of obsession fantasy, trauma."<sup>16</sup> But what is the trauma (or the obsession fantasy) that the Elsaesser family has suffered? Might it be the trauma of having been, like Martin Elsaesser, left out of history? But what is that history? That under a different regime, the genius of Martin Elsaesser would have been recognised? But this is history as a counter-factual, the rescue of a past that was never real. For what really happened is that, in however banal a fashion, Martin Elsaesser donned the uniform of the German army and played his part in the war. As a result, "Germany appears a nation of victims,"<sup>17</sup> with the attempt to rescue Martin Elsaesser from the dustbin of history leading to the realisation that, in a kind of strange inversion of what happens when Elsaesser watches *Mr. Klein* (1976), one wants to rescue all Germans from the inescapable past: "we are shattered by the knowledge of our total impotence; but which is also the knowledge of our own collusion and complicity."<sup>18</sup>

Surely to elicit such a complex set of reactions makes of Elsaesser's film an astonishing piece of work. Nonetheless, there is more for us to consider, including in particular how the filmmaker achieves this. Also in the persistence of history essay, Elsaesser speaks of "the 'political unconscious' of a popular text that by definition exceeds the control of the maker and which becomes a cultural or historical fact precisely because of this excess."<sup>19</sup> In its deliberate ambiguity—in its access-for-all nature—does the film exceed the control of the maker, or is the excess of control performed (the ambiguity is deliberate), and yet which performance masks another excess, which is the understated presence of a fascism with which the Elsaesser family was at least tactically compliant, if not outright collusive/complicit?

Thomas Elsaesser himself evoked in the Bedfordshire discussion of *Die Sonneninsel* how he felt he was tactically compliant with those who commissioned and who worked with him on its making. That is, while Elsaesser had his own ideas about the film that he

wanted to make, he could not make the film in exactly the way that he wanted—and that his film was stronger as a result of this. That is, for Elsaesser tactical compliance with the powers that be led to a film that got to be screened on German television, played at various festivals around the world, and which continues to get played at campuses in many places (perhaps as a result of Elsaesser's formidable reputation as a film scholar). In other words, while a documentary, it was by adopting the relatively mainstream aesthetics of the access-for-all work that the film was, or has been, validated. Success in the attention economy, then, is the criterion according to which Elsaesser defines success as a filmmaker. Compliance with (relatively) mainstream aesthetics (not least through the use of an authoritative, masculine voiceover) leads to mainstream results. A middle-of-the-road and accessible aesthetic is necessary to convince viewers that cinema can redeem history, including a history that never was. It is this that allows history to persist. It is this that allows Hollywood to persist. And it is this that allows Elsaesser to persist—since Hollywood is history and history is Hollywood, and if Elsaesser can make himself Hollywood, then he writes himself and his grandfather (back) into history, and only tactical compliance can achieve this.

When discussing the film at a screening at the University of Southern California in April 2018, interviewer Michael Renov pointed out how Elsaesser is almost a Zelig-like figure due to his and his family's capacity to be at the centre of history (the family past on the Sun Island, with the filmmaker also being in Paris during 1968, the west coast of the USA during the counter-culture of the 1970s and more). Indeed, Elsaesser has himself addressed how he happens almost accidentally to have persisted as part of the history of film studies ("you can do quite well, it seems, by repeating your mistakes, provided you persist with them long enough").<sup>20</sup> The desire to inscribe oneself in history, even if it means floating Zelig-like on its waves, never quite having a proper identity for oneself, an absence of self that perhaps also is an originary trauma that compels one to make cinema and to write history... perhaps signals history as precisely a history of blank, Zelig-like men who celebrate themselves while around them others live and die in their efforts genuinely to achieve a position, or as a result of having a position and an identity imposed upon them (the sense of envy that at least Jews have the Holocaust to help define them, the primary narcissism when someone else gains attention and not oneself, the desire to have said everything, to create and to become the walking equivalent of an access-for-all

cinema; in Elsaesser's own words, recognition "soothes the worry that what one has done doesn't really amount to much; it soothes the worry that what one is personally most proud of has gone unnoticed or unrecognized; and... is a wonderful plaster on the narcissistic wound and a palliative for any soul not immune to self-doubt"; furthermore, Elsaesser—of course!—has also anticipated and thus in some senses already made his own counter-argument when he implores scholars not to "put us on a pedestal; try occasionally also to push us off the pedestal").<sup>21</sup>

To be clear: the above paragraph is not a psychoanalysis of a human being whom I do not know well, with whom I have had some arguments, but who on the whole I find generous, intellectually curious, and good-humoured (by which I mean that he has had the good taste to laugh at at least a couple of the jokes that I have made in his presence, while also offering generous feedback on and engagement with a proof version of this very piece of writing). But let us run with the metaphor of Zelig as read through tactical compliance. And then let us think about what this does or can mean in the contemporary context of UK higher education and neoliberal hopelessness more generally.

Elsaesser proposes that tactical compliance is a proposed way out of neoliberal hopelessness, since, in reference to the filmmaker as *auteur*, he or she "draws strength, persistence and inspiration from the very constraints that the system—in this case, the Hollywood studio system—imposes on him or her."<sup>22</sup> It is, he continues, akin to wearing what art critic Bazon Brock terms an *Etruscan smile*: "it is a positive agreement with the forces that seem to determine one's fate, because these forces invariably reveal themselves as either inherently antagonistic, and therefore full of interstitial spaces of freedom and agency, or they are so chaotic and contingent that riding them—rather than resisting them—generates new energies and open paths that lead to surprising discoveries."<sup>23</sup> However, if for Elsaesser-as-filmmaker, tactical compliance, after initial resistance to commercial and other pressures, means "letting the parapaxes of the creative process impinge more on my work," he is not here talking specifically about allowing his film to include the kind of "beautiful accidents" that Orson Welles describes as being central to cinema in *Filming Othello* (1978).<sup>24</sup> And when Elsaesser describes "external constraints as an invitation for tactical compliance,"<sup>25</sup> he is not just talking about the way in which Lars von Trier sets creative and technical challenges for Jørgen Leth to work around in *De fem benspænd* (*The Five Obstructions*, 2003). For, he is also suggesting that one complies not with contingency,

but with capital, and that one complies not with chance, but with systems of control. The Etruscan may smile at the perversity of fate; but if the control society makes her smile while eating shit, then what sort of Etruscan smile is that really?

Indeed, to smile while eating shit (to be tactically compliant with the neoliberalisation of higher education) is not particularly palatable—even if the image evokes Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, 1975), a film that fits into Elsaesser's schema of a Baudrillardian cinema that uses the fascism of cinema against itself. Using the fascism of cinema against itself may be precisely what Elsaesser means by tactical compliance. But in writing this essay, I do not feel that I am undertaking tactical compliance with those who want to make me eat shit. I am, rather, directly confronting them with the violence of my language and imagery, trying *à la* Pasolini and not so much *à la* Elsaesser and middle-of-the-road/access-for-all film aesthetics to make my shitty message palatable—precisely because it should not be, and shit should be called out as shit, not polished and dressed up as hot *haute cuisine*. What is more, it does not seem that tactical compliance with neoliberal capital will redeem me in any way; it takes my blood, sweat and tears, my life force, and has no interest in giving back to me. On the contrary, it seeks to make me not feel safe or protected, but precarious and in danger—for the purposes of making me work ever-harder in a fearful fashion, aspects of contemporary life to which Elsaesser himself made reference in his keynote address. Tactical compliance might work if it were precisely that: compliant. Which is to say that it might work if it involved capital adapting to me as much as it involves me adapting to capital. But rarely if at all does capital seem to accommodate me (this is not about money; I am made persistently to feel shit about myself regardless of my relatively comfortable material existence, while also being told to feel lucky that I have a job); if I do not accommodate it, it will simply discard me and that is that. I will lead a bare life on the outside, abjected and forgotten (my relatively comfortable material existence could be taken away at any instant).

But perhaps this is precisely the point of my interest in an aesthetics of so-called non-cinema, in which abjection and the obscure are not brought into the light as is Martin Elsaesser, but instead remain precisely in the darkness, both because the darkness is a more powerful force than the light (the light suffers from the illusion that it does not need the darkness, but it does) and so as not to destroy the very darkness that constitutes its being. Rather than become light by becoming cinema, I wish to explore how my desire to become light is a shameful denial of the darkness that I know lies within me. This, to me, se-

ems a more honest way of living: it is to recognise my propensity for and attraction towards fascism in a bid to rise above it and not to indulge it, rather than flatly to deny it in the self-promotional cacophony of the contemporary world (I made a short film in 2000 called *The Hitler*, which is about a young WW2 obsessive who wakes up one morning to discover that the war never took place and that Hitler was instead a celebrated artist; unable to cope with this alternative reality, the main character becomes Hitler so as to bring this alternate reality in line with the history that he has only otherwise known). But to admit to failings and to failure (to admit to the potential for fascism within oneself), even if in a *de facto* performative fashion (but what else is there other than performance?), is to resist rather than to be compliant with neoliberal capital.

I wrote once that Steven Spielberg might possibly be understood against himself as a kind of Lorenzaccio figure. In Alfred de Musset's 1834 play of the same name, Lorenzino de Medici becomes complicit with the ruling tyrant, his cousin Alessandro, so as to get close enough to him to kill him. Lorenzo understands that in doing so, no one will believe that he really is a rebel deep inside.<sup>26</sup> But this is a sacrifice that he is willing to make in order to topple Alessandro. Similarly, then, Spielberg might be some sort of accelerationist filmmaker who is speeding up the train of capital in order to derail it, a trope drawn not from Spielberg but rather from the film *Speed* (Jan de Bont, USA, 1994). I am not sure that I buy this possible case of tactical compliance, not least after seeing the shimmering shit that was *Ready Player One* (2018), in which we do not see acceleration used to derail the train, but rather in which the reverse gear is used in order to keep the train running—even if the film gestures at some anti-corporate rhetoric based on the fandom of highly mainstream items that have long since been marketed as “cult” for the purposes of interpellating those fans into endless nostalgia reboots.

What is more, I have also spent a whole monograph arguing that one can get philosophically progressive ideas out of mainstream Hollywood blockbusters.<sup>27</sup> But giving mainstream cinema its due (or at least to recognise its potential for resistance, as opposed to its persistence) was only ever (or so I say) then to flip our considerations of cinema in the digital era and to argue that so-called “non-cinema” is not only the equal to cinema, but perhaps also its superior.<sup>28</sup> For, to invoke another couple of films mentioned in Elsaesser's history essay, I am well aware that if one spends too long among the mainstreamers, then one can like Marcello Clerici (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Lucien Lacombe (Pierre

Blaise), respectively the anti-heroes of *Il Conformista* (*The Conformist*, 1970) and *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974), simply become seduced by fascism. Give to me that outrageous and liberatingly offensive film work of Christoph Schlingensief.

I am stupid. I read slowly. I get things wrong the whole time. I am terrible at relationships. I am self-absorbed. I crave attention. I am lazy. I am exploitative. And more. It may be that I need the Holocaust. Indeed, to confess tactical compliance, or to be Zelig-like, is perhaps simply an act of honesty. I know that I do not in my heart of hearts do enough to help my fellow humans to free them from the yoke of capitalism, while also living off many of the comforts that the capitalist world affords (including, for example, being able to travel from London to Los Angeles and by extension to attend a screening of *Die Sonneninsel* at USC—the carbon footprint of which journey alone makes it questionable). What is more, I know full well that I suffer from a deep narcissism that wants attention and for myself to be inscribed into history, and which drives me to work in a Stakhanovite fashion since this quasi-accelerationist (and thus compliant—as Elsaesser also suggested!) policy is my personal way of resisting (I'll give you more productivity than you can or will want). So on one level, we must recognise the already-existing nature of tactical compliance if we are to progress.

Nonetheless, I say such personal things because to the best of my stupid understanding, the resistance has to start with the self, within the self, perhaps even against the concept of the self (Elsaesser talks of “the perpetual plea bargaining between me and myself”).<sup>29</sup> One has to divide oneself, to find the many selves that lie within the otherwise supposedly unified subject. I have then to put my selves to work—to bring all of my selves into what it is that I do. I have to make personal my life, to have my selves resound through my whole existence in order to be a person (so-called because of the sound/*son* that comes through/*per* the mask). Not to be a person only some of the time—i.e. when not at work (which in this day and age is when?). To be a person all of the time (perhaps especially when at work).

Elsaesser has made a personal film that in some ways is very beautiful. But through tactical compliance, it also becomes an oddly impersonal film about a very personal topic. As Agnieszka Piotrowska asked at the conference, what does the filmmaker himself feel about any or all of this? Clearly something because he is making the film. And clearly something because he is making the film to rehabilitate the reputation of his grandfather.

There is a kind of love here—and it is certainly not my place to demand that love only take on a form that I can recognise. But at the same time, the film hides more than it reveals.

In our performatively confessional culture, to reveal oneself might well be perceived as a means to attract attention, to become light and to put oneself forward for surveillance, and thus to play into the hands of neoliberal capital's attention economy. Nonetheless, many such performances are insincere, disingenuous and done for the purposes of garnering and maintaining attention. They seek to live forever. But to disavow the pull of immortality is surely also to be insincere. Is the trick not as consciously as one can to confess not one's sins, but one's attraction towards confession? Is to achieve atheism not to address one's need for god? And is to know god not to confess to her that one does not believe in her?

"[T]he crimes named by Nazism and the Holocaust cannot possibly be 'our' history, just as it need not only be 'our' testimony or mourning work. Therein lies a hope, but also an obligation."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps Elsaesser bravely does not claim as "his" one history that is not "his" to claim—although since the film is about the rehabilitation of Martin Elsaesser, this suggestion seems hard to uphold. Indeed, perhaps the filmmaker also denies a history that we might hope is his obligation to address. In the age of neoliberal hopelessness, perhaps it is our obligation to essay towards making the conditions for new hope—even if one is quixotically on a course towards failure. Perhaps we must see giants where there are windmills and tilt madly towards them. Perhaps it is only a kind of *amour fou*—madness as love—that will allow us to hope for a better, different world. Tactically to be compliant with it (not least if compliance really results not in mutual bending, but in implication) is to play its own game, aesthetically and politically. Perhaps now is the time to be mad and to go mad. To fail and to fall outside, or to be abjected from the inhuman world in order to find a more personal engagement with the world in a minor fashion that will be neglected, will die, will not be commemorated, but which will humbly feed back into the humus that feeds all life. Not to become light, but to become dirt. Not to slide along with neoliberal capital in a tactically compliant fashion, but strategically to experience the erotics of erosion as one resists and grinds oneself down against it (to be more like Liesel Elsaesser than like Martin, whom Thomas Elsaesser can claim is thus embodying such an attitude in his access-for-all film, even as she is not front-and-centre and as Martin is the

main focus of the film's narrative?). To lead such a life may not be cinema or cinematic, but it is to give to one's life a project, or to create a life's work, to make of oneself dust that will breed yet more life. To be a human rather than to be an image—at a time when our students are calling out for human connections even as they are interpellated into the attention economy of the image society. Perhaps resistance is not to seek to live forever or to be commemorated in (phallic) light (to be placed on a pedestal), but rather to accept death, to absent oneself from life. To ex-ist rather than to per-sist. Perhaps to exist is the new hope that can be found in this otherwise persistent age of neoliberal hopelessness.<sup>31</sup>

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1. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, eds., *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

2. Anonymous (2018) "Tongues Untied", *The Greatest Films*, accessed 7 September 2018, <https://www.thegreatestfilms.com/Film/1989/Tongues-Untied>.

3. Thomas Elsaesser, "Sonnen-Insulaner: On a Berlin Island of Memory", in *Memory Culture and the Contemporary City*, ed. Uta Staiger, Henriette Steiner and Andrew Webber (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 47.

4. Thomas Elsaesser, "Creativity and Neoliberalism: Between Autonomy, Resistance and Tactical Compliance", keynote address delivered at *Creative Practice Research in the Age of NeoLiberal Hopelessness Conference*, 11 May 2018. Also to be published in Agnieszka Piotrowska, ed., *Creative Practice Research (In the Age of NeoLiberal Hopelessness)* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

5. Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood: From Cinephile Moments to Blockbuster Memories* (London: Routledge, 2012).

6. In his keynote, Elsaesser described how, "without me fully realizing it at the time, there was considerable evidence of Elsaesser, the author of books on Weimar Cinema and Expressionist films, and Elsaesser, the writer about Hollywood mind-game films, time travel and other cinematic thought experiments [in an early version of the film]: in short, it was more *Shutter Island* [2010] than *Sun Island*." Perhaps the final version went more in the direction of *Avatar* (2009) than *Shutter Island*! See Elsaesser, "Creativity and Neoliberalism".

7. Vivian Sobchack, ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (London: Routledge, 1997).

8. Elsaesser, "Subject Positions, Speaking Positions: From *Holocaust*, *Our Hitler* and *Heimat* to *Shoah* and *Schindler's List*," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (London: Routledge, 1997), 159.

9. *Ibid.*, 160.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 155.

13. *Ibid.*, 151.

14. *Ibid.*, 163.

15. *Ibid.*, 166.

16. *Ibid.*, 146.

17. *Ibid.*, 171.

18. *Ibid.*, 175.

19. *Ibid.*, 168.

20. Elsaesser, "Stepping Sideways: SCMS Lifetime Membership Address, March 6, 2008, Philadelphia, PA", *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (2009): 123.

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21. Ibid., 121 and 127. There is an ambiguity in this essay between Elsaesser having simply been the beneficiary of what he terms the “parapraxes” of history and the “narcissism” to which he also makes reference. Note that he only asks scholars to *try* to knock him and his fellows from their SCMS-created pedestal (Elsaesser places himself alongside Laura Mulvey, Robin Wood, Noël Burch, Stuart Hall and Richard Dyer). Either he does not really want it to happen, or he believes that it is not really possible...

22. Elsaesser, “Creativity and Neoliberalism”.

23. Ibid.

24. For more on this, see William Brown, *Non-Cinema: Global Digital Filmmaking and the Multitude* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 147-148.

25. Elsaesser, “Creativity and Neoliberalism”.

26. Brown, “It’s a Shark-Eat-Shark World: The Ambiguous Politics of Steven Spielberg”, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7, no. 1 (2009): 13-22.

27. Brown, *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013).

28. Brown, *Non-Cinema*.

29. Elsaesser, “Stepping Sideways”, 121.

30. Elsaesser, “Subject Positions”, 179.

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