Critical Response
I
Response to Thomas Elsaesser

Miriam Ross

Thomas Elsaesser's recent essay adds to and substantiates a recent wave of scholarship on stereoscopic (3-D) cinema that has arisen, no doubt, due to the increase in 3-D cinema production in recent years and the availability of older films through re-released Blu-rays (Thomas Esaesser, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century," *Critical Inquiry* 39 [Winter 2013]: 217–46).[1] Continuing a point that he made in 2010 when he wrote, "D-3-D is not a special effect. Quite the contrary, it is establishing a new visual standard,"[2] Elsaesser states in "The 'Return' of 3-D" that stereoscopic cinema offers "a different kind of mental image" (p. 218). Much work on 3-D cinema has been concerned with its industrial dimensions and how it fares commercially in comparison to other screen technologies. By expanding on this work to take into account 3-D cinema's unique aesthetic qualities, Elsaesser takes forward analysis begun by William Paul's work on 3-D cinema's *aesthetics of emergence* and Akira Mizuta Lippit's claim for 3-D cinema as *total cinema*.[3] In doing so, "The "Return' of 3-D" enriches a field containing much uncharted territory.

1. For a full bibliography, see *Stereoscopic Media,* www.stereoscopicmedia.org
2. Thomas Elsaesser, "The Dimension of Depth and Objects Rushing towards Us," *eDIT Filmmaker's Magazine* 1 (2010): www.filmmakersfestival.com/en/magazine/ausgabe-12010/the-dimension-of-depth/the-dimesion-of-depth-and-objects-rushing-towards-us.html
3. See William Paul, "The Aesthetics of Emergence," *Film History* 5 (Sept. 1993): 321–55, and Akira Mizuta Lippit, "Three Phantasies of Cinema-Reproduction, Mimesis, Annihilation," *Paragraph* 22 (Nov. 1999): 213–27.

874

While the new wave of scholarship on stereoscopy is to be welcomed and is increasing in strength, the field often suffers from a lack of rigorous historical investigation. There are numerous 3-D myths in circulation, particularly on internet sites and in journalistic accounts. Although they attest to the popularity of stereoscopy in the public imagination, they often make erroneous claims that alter and shift our understanding of stereoscopy's development and reception. Unfortunately, Elsaesser's essay contributes to the substantiation of some of these myths. While the errors are minor and do not detract from the many noteworthy points made in Elsaesser's arguments, they are worth correcting as they have significant implications for the way in which we understand stereoscopy's history.

On page 220, Elsaesser discusses "the rise and fall (also called the Golden Age) of anaglyph 3-D from 1952 to roughly 1954." There is a common misconception that 3-D films from this era were produced in the anaglyph (red/cyan) format. However, numerous historical accounts of 3-D cinema, including the trade journals of the time, make it clear that the 1950s US films were produced for the polarized glasses system (similar to the system used in most movie theatres today).[4] As Ray Zone states, "Almost every one of the 3-D feature films made in the 1950s was shot with a stereoscopic rig combining two 35mm cameras together to produce the twin-strip or dual-band format in use in the theaters with two interlocked projectors, polarizers, and the silver screen."[5] The perception that most twentieth-century 3-D films were screened in an anaglyph format suggests that older films were visually inferior to both their contemporary 2-D counterparts and the more recent wave of digital 3-D cinema. Although there were often technical problems in the alignment of cameras and projection equipment during the 1950s, their visual qualities were not so different from the films we have today.

At another point Elsaesser writes of "Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder* (1954), shot and advertised in 3-D but only ever released in 2-D." The *3-Dfilmarchive* offers excellent analysis of the production and reception of *Dial M for Murder*, including the reproduction of pages from 1950s

4. See Henry Kogel, "SMPTE, Exhibitor Conference on 3-D," in *3-D Cinema and Television Technology: The First 100 Years*, ed. Michael D. Smith, Peter Ludé, and Bill Hogan (White Plains, N.Y., 2011), pp. 190–92, and Lenny Lipton, *Foundations of the Stereoscopic Cinema: A Study in Depth* (New York, 1982).

5. Ray Zone, *3-D Revolution: The History of Modern Stereoscopic Cinema* (Lexington, Ky., 2012), p. 29.

M I R I A M R O S S is lecturer in film at Victoria University of Wellington and administrator of stereoscopicmedia.org

trade journals to support its claims that there were some initial screenings of *Dial M for Murder* in 3-D. In its analysis, the *3-Dfilmarchive* offers compelling evidence that Hitchcock was frustrated by technical aspects of filming in 3-D but enthusiastic about its visual effects.[6] Although Elsaesser is correct that the film was shot and marketed to be screened in 3-D, the notion that the film was only ever played in 2-D is often taken up by other critics to suggest that Hitchcock's involvement with 3-D was minimal and reluctant.

On page 225 Elsaesser discusses "3-D, which in any case already existed around 1902, when the Lumières (and not Méliès!) projected 3-D films at the Paris World Exhibition onto a giant screen." In *Stereoscopic Cinema and the Origins of 3-D film, 1838–1952,* Zone details the confused history surrounding the Lumière brothers' first presentation of 3-D moving images but verifies that no presentation in 3-D took place until 1936.[7] This is confirmed in *3-D Cinema and Television Technology: The First 100 Years,* which reprints both Louis Lumière's 1930s' account of his first presentation of stereoscopic moving images and a *Variety* article from the same time.[8] This evidence significantly shifts the timeline of 3-D cinema's historical development. However, rather than suggesting that 3-D cinema was not envisioned until a later date, the Lumières myth hints at the activity that was taking place at the turn of the century. Various patent applications were in place for the development of stereoscopic moving images, in this way signaling significant interest from filmmakers at the same time as 2-D cinema's initial development.[9]

In one of his arguments, Elsaesser highlights the lack of scholarship on the military and educational uses of stereoscopy; he states that Zone "does not mention nonentertainment uses in his *Stereoscopic Cinema and the Origins of 3-D Film, 1838–1952*" (p. 241 n.61). To the contrary, Zone explains the use of Vectograph 3-D technology for aerial reconnaissance in World War II on page 160. Zone adds to earlier work by R. M. Hayes on military

6. See Bob Furmanek and Greg Klintz, "An In-depth Look at . . . 'Dial M for Murder,'" *3-Dfilmarchive,* www.3dfilmarchive.com/dial-m-blu-ray-review

7. See Zone, *Stereoscopic Cinema and the Origins of 3-D Film, 1838–1952* (Lexington, Ky., 2007), p. 142.

8. See Louis Lumière, "Stereoscopy on the Screen" and "Tri-Dimensional Films Explained by Louis Lumiere," in *3-D Cinema and Television Technology,* pp. 96–101, 102. See also Eddie Sammons, *The World of 3-D Movies* (1992), p. 27, www.stereoscopic2.org/library/sammons.php

9. See Laurent Mannoni, "The 'Feeling of Life': The Birth of Stereoscopic Film," in *Paris in 3-D: From Stereoscopy to Virtual Reality 1850–2000,* ed. Françoise Reynaud, Catherine Tambrun, and Kim Timby (exhibition catalog, Museé Carnavalet, Paris, 4 Oct.–30 Dec. 2000), pp. 91–95.

uses, noting that "going over the patents filed for stereoscopic systems I was shocked by how many related to military use only."[10]

One of the difficulties for current scholarship on stereoscopic cinema is the multiple use of similar-sounding terminology. Although 3-D cinema is widely understood to refer to duo-image stereoscopic processes, animation specialists have long used 3-D to refer to aspects and techniques implemented in their monocular work. Similarly, the term *stereo* has been affixed to a number of technologies without necessarily referring to duo-image systems. When Elsaesser says, "for a general overview of the relation between stereoscopy and early cinema, see Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907,*" it is worth noting that Musser makes only one reference to the stereoscope and instead devotes much time to discussing the relationship between the stereopticon and early cinema (p. 231 n. 32). Although similar sounding in name, the stereopticon is not a stereoscopic viewing process but rather a system for showing magic lantern slides. There were attempts to show magic lantern slides in a stereoscopic format,[11] but Musser does not refer to them.

I hope that by providing these various points I can signal that, on the one hand, scholarship on stereoscopy still needs serious historical research, yet, on the other hand, it is a rich field ripe for further development. Elsaesser's "The 'Return' of 3-D" makes a significant contribution that helps ignite critical investigation into stereoscopy's multifaceted components.

10. R. M. Hayes, *3-D Movies: A History and Filmography of Stereoscopic Cinema* (Jefferson, N.C., 1988), p. 21. See also Leon Gurevitch and Miriam Ross, "Stereoscopic Media: Scholarship beyond Booms and Busts," *Public Culture* (forthcoming).

11. See Brian Coe, "William Friese Greene and the Origins of Cinematography," *Screen* 10 (May 1969): 72–83, and Lumière, "Stereoscopy on the Screen."