Editorial Notes

The editors are pleased to announce that Miriam Hansen has agreed to join the editorial board of Critical Inquiry. Professor Hansen is a noted film scholar and member of the department of English at the University of Chicago. Her latest book is entitled Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (forthcoming).

The editors also would like to announce that David Schabes has replaced Ellen R. Feldman as Manuscript Editor.

We received the following letter and response concerning Stanley Cavell’s pair of essays, “Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly: Bette Davis and Now, Voyager,” and “Postscript (1989): To Whom It May Concern” (Critical Inquiry 16 [Winter 1990]: 213–89).

There is a certain “postfeminist” irony in Stanley Cavell’s recent work, which focuses on what he calls melodramas of “unknown women.” Wishing to create the impression that he is the first person to discover the worth of these texts and to approach them with intellectual seriousness and critical generosity, Cavell claims to be saving them from “feminist condescension”—although, in fact, much feminist discussion of the so-called weepies has aimed to rescue the genre from the contempt of male critics. Inasmuch as Cavell, despite this specific charge against feminists, fails to cite any of the women working in his area, fails to name them (Doane, Jacobs, LaPlace, and others have written powerful critiques of Now, Voyager and other Bette Davis films), and inasmuch as Critical Inquiry exempts Cavell from the minimal requirements of scholarship, both parties perpetuate the very condition being analyzed: they participate in a system in which women go unrecognized, their voices unheard, their identities “unknown.” Thus Woman can be

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maintained as enigma—the dark continent which men explore, colonize, and “defend,” claiming exclusive rights to territory they need to see as virgin.

—Tania Modleski
University of Southern California

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The number and range of severe charges that Tania Modleski has brought together against both my intellectual conduct and my fantasy life will, I hope understandably, take more space to sketch answers to than they have taken to state. I start with the issue of condescension, continue with that of failed scholarship, then that of the title “Unknown Woman,” and close with a word about the fantasy of rescue.

Does to speak of a person's showing “a certain condescension” (p. 227) toward certain works imply or suggest (as Modleski finds me to imply or suggest) that that person lacks intellectual seriousness and critical generosity, and that he or she cannot have aimed to rescue those very works from contempt, nor have written powerful critiques of the works? It does not and it should not. Those intellectual virtues might consistently serve to intensify condescension. Speaking of condescension was my poor, summary way of registering my impression of a complex of attitudes—toward film, philosophy, maleness, art, America—that I have felt to lie behind certain appropriations of, perhaps mainly behind certain silences about, work I do and work I am interested in. The sort of thing I meant is, it seems to me, expressed in the statement of Modleski’s that appears on the jacket of Mary Ann Doane’s The Desire to Desire: “the definitive psychoanalytic account of the repression of woman in Hollywood cinema.” Taken one way, those words may be leaving it open, even taking it as obvious, that women are (also) treated otherwise in Hollywood cinema (as well as otherwise repressed in other cinema). But it seems clear enough, in context, that these words invoke a concept of Hollywood cinema part of whose stock meaning is the glamorizing and repression of women. The specific implication I am pointing to, and taking exception to, is that what is called Hollywood characteristically produced no, or few, films whose artistic and philosophical intelligence were consciously and centrally involved in countering Hollywood’s characteristic repression of women, and whose intelligence (hence) could not match the superior intelligence of the advanced critics now addressing them. I do not deny that serious Hollywood films (supposing that is not an oxymoron) may fail further ideological and artistic tests. But a fixed concept of Holly-
wood films that from the beginning blocks or blurs the imagination of characteristic instances of them as themselves countering such a concept, makes what I have written about certain sets of Hollywood films quite pointless, or say nonreferential.

Modleski lists three texts my citing of which would perhaps have saved me from her charge against my failure of scholarship. I had read Maria LaPlace's "Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film" and sections of Doane's The Desire to Desire, including the pages on Now, Voyager (I have not yet seen the Jacobs piece, which I think is also not cited in the LaPlace nor in the Doane texts in question). Whatever their evident value and interest, both strike me as exhibiting, in different ways, the sort of (superior) attitude I meant in speaking of a certain condescension. I will not ask for space here to verify this. Just to state it: each claims to see and analyze something that the films they discuss cannot see and analyze, whereas the films are, according to my reading, exactly about that something. LaPlace describes Now, Voyager as finding an orbit (in which women can make sense of their lives) "despite itself," whereas I in effect claim that the film is meant to create, to constitute, such an orbit in response to its own discovery of the powers of film. Doane writes valuably of Hollywood film's "medical discourse," in which, unknown to itself, it shows "the doctor's work [to be] the transformation of the woman into a specular object," equating her "health" with her "looks." But Now, Voyager denies the latter equation (the woman remains "ill" after her looks change, and whatever her illness means is part of what attracts men to her); and a film like Cukor's A Woman's Face can be seen explicitly to examine a medical discourse (plastic surgery) as a metaphor for the (transformative) work of a male film director, which is shown to contrast with other ways in which men "create" women.

To assess the (metaphorical) distinction between interpretations of a work which do and those which do not allow the work its say in its interpretation, its voice in its history of reception, is to assess one's stake in theory and criticism. It would be of no value to me in this process to deny the value of such work as I have just cited by LaPlace and by Doane; nor am I in a position to measure how characteristic, or contested, the attitudes and accomplishments of their work are in feminist film theory. So since it seems to me generally recognized, and incontestable, that feminist theory is, as a body of work, the most influential in the field of film study, its most powerful force, I allowed myself to place myself by a quick expression of my impression of condescension in it toward a class of films I write about. Nothing I said, or thought, rules out the possibility that condescension may be justified, or necessitated, say politically, or artistically.

Modleski's phrase "feminist condescension," which she attributes to me, along with the motive of saving the genre of "weepies" from it,
falsifies the tentativeness and the placement of my alluding to "a certain condescension" (my implied rhetoric is: even among feminist critics), a phrase which comes in response to the preceding sentence in which I contest any and all "nonfeminist" interpretations—which include, surely, those interpretations Modleski identifies as "male" expressions of contempt—of members of the genre of film melodrama my project defines. It is a genre I explicitly deny is to be identified with "weepies" or tearjerkers, that is, with any concept meant to capture all so-called women's films. "Women's films" is a term taken from Hollywood advertising meant to group films together for purposes of promotion and distribution; it does not name a genre as I define the concept of genre for the films in the Hollywood genres I have studied; to save it is accordingly not part of my project. Saving it would, I suppose, where serious, be bound to court condescension, but not—on every concept of art and of the popular—necessitate it.

Modleski says that I "perpetuate the very condition being analyzed: . . . participate in a system in which women go unrecognized." Now my text emphatically, recurrently, insists that "I may be subject to the charge that in taking on a woman's words I am myself joining the list of men I describe in such films who take over or take away the woman's voice. The charge remains to be developed and, so far as I can see how, responded to" (p. 232). This issue is reformulated a number of times in the pair of essays for which Modleski takes me to task. The rightness in her demand that I name names is its demand to make my responses to feminist theory, since I bring the matter up, textually specific. It was in part out of my sharing that sense of the matter that I found myself unwilling to publish my first text on Now, Voyager (recording a reading of the film first presented in essentials in the spring of 1984) without including as part of it the second text, called "Postscript (1989)," which I announce in the opening paragraph of the first as written "in interference with" (p. 214) the first and as responding to two essays on gender, or sexual identity, that appeared since my project began. I more than once describe my writing of the "Postscript" as, as in its opening paragraph, "hurried and improvisatory" (p. 248). While quite true, the point of insisting on its truth was to declare myself, investigate myself, as subject to the male panic the "Postscript" takes up. It is part of the unpleasantness in Modleski's undeniable charge that I participate in a system that denies women recognition and that is deaf to their voices, that she fails to register that not only do I raise this charge against myself in my first text, but in my second I go into a diagnosis of male panic perhaps internal to Western philosophizing that may be at the cause of silencing (or baffling) the feminine voice. Of course it is part of the, let's say, logic of the issue that the expression of this general panic may itself be a cover for failing to express a more immediately painful, because more specific, fault, more specific politically and/or psycholog-
ically. But this is not how Modleski, in her psychopolitical profile of me, confirms her accusation of me.

One of the two essays I discuss in "Postscript (1989)" is Modleski's study of Letter from an Unknown Woman; I introduce that discussion by recording the circumstances of my having been sent a copy of that essay. Recording these circumstances was a not particularly graceful way of, of course, acknowledging the awkwardness of my putting off (perhaps wrongly, perhaps rightly, perhaps neither) confronting feminist writing specifically and explicitly for so long that I now did not see where to begin. This is not the first time I have found myself in this position. Working the intersections or interstices of a number of professionally or institutionally dissociated subjects (it is a pertinent question why this is what I do; has it to do just with me, or also with the nature of those professions and institutions?) I seem to myself to exist in chronic intellectual and scholarly arrears, and it is easy to make me feel chagrin and guilt for having failed to know of pertinent work. But it is also not so hard—as my description of receiving the copy of Modleski's essay is also meant to indicate—to get me to talk about something I ought to talk about.

I am asking, in effect, whether my not going further into feminist writing about film is fairly characterized as a failure to meet the minimal requirements of scholarship in my Now, Voyager texts. I do not imagine that Modleski is accusing me of plagiarism or of scholarly ingratitude (failure to cite indebtedness for specific ideas or procedures, or indebtedness for initiating or enabling one's interest in or conception of a range of study). There is the further matter of how one places oneself in a general, especially competing, intellectual domain, which is not a minimal requirement of scholarship but an optional way of making oneself understood. I have in effect been saying or showing in this reply that I see no clear and general way of placing myself in connection with the body of feminist film theory. I do not even know that it is relevantly competing. The situation may be compared with my being told for about a decade now that if I want to be read more widely I should make explicit and develop the relations between what I have been doing over the years and what has been done in French thought over those years. I seem to have taken the inner position, with respect to feminist film theory as with respect to French thought (not unrelated events), particularly deconstruction, that I started down my paths long enough ago so that others are better placed than I to see what relations there are that might be worth developing. I have never thought that my silence on these subjects (broken more and more in recent years, it is true, where I can be specific) stood to harm anyone but myself. Since feminist film theory is the dominant force in film study, as French thought is, or was until yesterday, in literary theory (and the forces interact), what credit the work I do has found in those domains exists
mostly as an alternative to the dominant mode. Certain fantasies of providing such an alternative are agreeable to me; being accused of slighting, as if they were unrecognized, those in power, is not agreeable. (I don’t know what to ward off next. Let me add explicitly that in saying that feminism is dominant in certain academic domains I am not saying that women are sufficiently empowered either in academic institutions or in those of the nation at large. And I do not believe, I would hate to think, that my work behaves as if that lack of empowerment is just.)

There is still a further charge to which my silence about feminist film theory may have opened me, a charge less famous but no less painful in its effects, let me call it rejecting the offer of serious conversation; it is a form of avoiding the acknowledgment of the existence of others. In my “Postscript,” turning for a moment to the other of the two essays I mentioned which came to bear hard and late on my film melodrama project, I felt pressed to take up, and take on, in my way, Eve Sedgwick’s paradoxical use of the image of the “closet,” not as a place of an, as it were, well-understood secret, but exactly instead as the name of a place of an unknowable secret, from which you cannot, accordingly, get clear. Something you can do, instead, is to find, let us say, a terminably interminable conversation (endings without end) about what a secret must be to be unknowable, say untellable, unsayable, hence a conversation about privacy and the conditions of publicness, about their gains and losses, and call that philosophy. I work out the idea of the closet, so conceived, as the place philosophy seeks, and repudiates, its feminine voice. Since philosophy, as I have variously characterized it, is a process, and a process that necessarily distrusts the process, of reading; call it a craving for education that attacks one’s education as it stands; and since this takes place as conversation (oneself perhaps taking on different voices); to deny conversation genuinely offered is a denial of philosophy. It is a standing possibility. It is sometimes necessary. Is it true of what I have written? Have I treated an offer of conversation in this way? If my particular history of avoidances, disappointments, rumors, desires, responsibilities, has allowed paranoia to get the better of me here, so that I have from a sense of slight dealt slight, I regret it; I mean to do better.

Tania Modleski and I met for the first time at a conference held this past May at the University of California, San Diego. At the evening reception after the official business of formal papers and discussions was over, the two of us struck up an unattended, freer conversation about lots of things at once. I broke the silence about her letter, informing her that Critical Inquiry had sent a copy on to me with an invitation to print a reply if I wished, and that I had accepted the offer. She repeated something she had said earlier in the day, during the official discussion, namely that I had also not, in my talk there about Stella
Dallas, addressed feminism. I said that I could not deny it, and I went on to make a speech, beginning by recasting and seeking to take as given my earlier statements to her to the effect that my presence there meant that I knew I wanted to learn from and to respond to feminist writing about film more directly than I have felt prepared to do; and to the effect that the philosophical obstacles should not be underestimated, before all the persistence of two antagonistic traditions of academic philosophy, say German/French and English/American, since what academic feminist theory often means by philosophy (or theory), developing lines of French thought, is not what is meant by philosophy, is in some ways antithetical to what is meant, in the region of the academic world I mostly teach in and, although in contested forms, retain conviction in (also). I then arrived at something like the following inquiry: since I assume you don’t mean simply that I haven’t addressed the question of what women are to do to empower themselves, including how they are to think (which theories they are to accept, which to modify, which to reject), that is, I am sure we agree that I have exactly no say in the matter; I assume you mean that I haven’t said anything that feminists might take an interest in concerning the lives of men and women (actual and possible lives). But that is, or might be, an empirical claim, not a political position. And while I do not have enough evidence that feminists can take a positive interest in my work to weigh, impartially as it were, against the amount you could no doubt amass showing that they cannot, I have enough to believe that I am making the sort of sense I think of myself as making. Might you consider this possibility?—She said she might. (I hope I have accurately reconstructed my question, concerning the possibility that the sense I make within an obstructed intellectual scene bespeaks certain commonalities of value between us.)

It would please me if, to begin with, she were to reconsider her refusal to take my point about entitling a genre with the name of the “Unknown Woman.” That title, meant to take up the irony of Ophuls’s film Letter from an Unknown Woman, takes the genre to argue that we are (men and women, differently) in search of a feminine whose location keeps getting misplaced. In what I have written about the genre so far, the search becomes more explicitly, and variously, specified as a search for the mother, in Gaslight for the mother as assurer of one’s existence, in Now, Voyager for the mother in oneself, in Stella Dallas for the originating gaze of the mother. (Though, constituting a genre, all will contain, in some way, all.) The irony of Ophuls’s title identifies the film as the letter it depicts, a letter depicted as signed by a “Sister-in-charge” and countersigned by a mute male. Is it thereby endorsed, or is there rather an implied other message that this one contains? This enigma identifies the director (sender) as a mute woman/man. Evidently what is not said or shown is (being shown by this film to be) as important as
what is. I thought it clear enough that the, let's say, intimate bearings of my prose identify me with the figure of the sender, hence fictionally or critically as such a mute woman/man. Whatever the puzzles here, such a stance of criticism to identify the author (we might just as well say, identify the intention of the author) is a recuperation by parody and irony of a romantic theory of art (not, I take it, unfaithful to Ophuls's mood as a director). I also identify certain depicted males as kinds of unknown women—Jerry in *Now, Voyager* and Adam in *Adam's Rib*. Instead of surmising any such point here, Modleski accuses me of the banality of maintaining "Woman" as "enigma"—"the dark continent which men explore, colonize, and 'defend,' [hence] . . . need to see as virgin."

A sense can be given to this accusation that is all right with me. The sense goes with my late claim that banality is a subject of melodrama, a claim specified in the opening paragraph of my essay on *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and specified differently in my text on *Now, Voyager* in its discussion of Bette Davis's manner as an engagement with, or specification of, "camp." And it goes as well with my early claim that banality is a dimension of an indispensable subject of philosophy as I care about it most, a dimension of my "ordinary" or "everyday," the victim and rescuer of skepticism (but not, therefore, an ordinary confined to the discipline of philosophy).

I trust (at some stage what else can I do?) that I do not deny that philosophy's claim to the feminine is suspicious, nor do I claim to have taken its measure. But is it true (perhaps this is the point of Modleski's opening attribution of misplaced irony in my work) that the male's search for his feminine side must constitute the denial of the existence of women of flesh and blood in particular historical circumstances? I am sure it can lead to that, or follow from it. But how shall I give up what assurance I have that it can equally and irreplaceably lead to, or follow from, the lifting of that denial?

The banality of my search for the feminine of my character means, for example, that it is I who seek, and fear, rescue; I who want, and hide from, acknowledgment. Why I do, how its interpretation works itself out in my case—why I want rescue, by whom, from what; why I seek acknowledgment, not from this one, but from that one, despite what; and whether finding one's feminine side causes one's unknowableness, or the other way around; and how unknowableness gets transformed into unknowableness, and how unknowableness becomes a philosophical argument constituting psychic annihilation (which is a way I get to my location of, and preoccupation with, skepticism and its linking with melodrama and tragedy)—these are further, or next, questions. Are we to talk about them sometime?

—Stanley Cavell
Harvard University