

# Who's Silencing Whom?

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The Autumn, 1990, issue of *Critical Inquiry* contains an exchange between Tania Modleski and Stanley Cavell. Modleski's letter, addressed to the editors of the journal, was prompted by Cavell's essay on *Now, Voyager*, which had appeared in the Winter 1990 issue of *Critical Inquiry*. In her letter, Modleski expresses outrage at Cavell's presumption in writing about what are commonly called women's films. She accuses Cavell of writing in the service of an agenda that she understands as uncomplicatedly representative of patriarchy in its effort to keep women's voices unheard and women themselves unknown.

Modleski's letter does not address any specific points of Cavell's essay. By not engaging with the essay's thought, her letter demonstrates a particular way of treating Cavell — that is, it authorizes people serious about film, and especially about women's films, to think that they can simply dismiss Cavell, be silent about his work, cast him out of discussions of pertinence to film studies.

In his reply, Cavell argues against Modleski's charge that he represents patriarchy and pointedly asks that the usefulness of what he says about film melodrama be an issue held open. He elaborates on the fact that his writing about film melodrama is, in part, an exploration of his own unknownness. He characterizes this search for his "feminine side" specifically in relation to the concept of the closet (a concept he derives from Eve Sedgwick's writing), in which he identifies the closet as "a name of a place of an unknowable secret," which, for him, is also to be thought of as "the place philosophy seeks, and repudiates, its feminine voice." Repression of the feminine voice in philosophy is identified by Cavell as a motivation of philosophical skepticism. It is in this characterization of philosophical issues as gendered and engaged in acts of repression that Cavell's writing about film melodrama constitutes a development within philosophy, and this characterization also constitutes a development of Cavell's own philosophical work, within which the skeptical problematic — doubt that we exist, doubt that the world exists — has always occupied a crucial place.

Given that Cavell has replied to Modleski publicly and, as he states, with her apparent consent (also published in *Critical Inquiry*), privately, I leave open the possibility that their exchange has gone somewhat further than we might claim to know. I am going first to discuss certain elements of their public exchange that I understand as important to film studies, to our work, and in particular to the spirit in which we address one another and, perhaps, others generally. I am then going to undertake to show, briefly, how the problematics or condition of silence and unknownness constitute long-standing, fundamental subjects in Cavell's writing in order to elaborate on specific ways in which Cavell's recent writing about film melodrama is consistent with, as it is also a development of, his philosophical project.

I hope I am not alone in being struck by the idea that the Modleski/Cavell exchange is representative of a crisis in film studies. The crisis it brings home to me has to do with film studies' history of exchange and equally of non-exchange, hence with something as panoramic as film studies' definition of itself as a field. Because of our history of public exchange, I do not assume that everyone will or can agree with my picture of the Modleski/Cavell exchange, any more than I can assume that my remarks here will meet with agreement. What I am hoping is that my remarks prompt discussion about serious issues, issues we might characterize as political — that is, whose work is to be cited as we go forward in film studies, and why; or, more broadly, on what grounds film studies is to accept certain paths and call them the routes of our thoughtful expression — and as intellectual — that is, how film studies has arrived at its present intellectual constitution, wherein, on the surface at least, it appears to have accepted certain trains of thought as appropriate to, hence definitive of, film.

As I say these things, I speak with an awareness that the field is composed of scholars with deep commitments and loyalties. Such attachments, often passionate, are not easy to review or investigate. After all, or before all, we have staked our lives on various intellectual claims. But I am also increasingly aware, partly through my attendance at SCS annual conferences, that dissatisfactions with the construction of film studies as a field are surfacing, that beyond the veneer of the joint enterprise of examining films, the field of film studies now contains individuals who, like me, understand themselves to suffer some form of silence within the field. So perhaps my topic, prompted by the Modleski/Cavell exchange, is about a crisis I will provisionally call our effort, as a field, to silence voices, both male and female.

Modleski writes, I daresay consciously, a letter about women's films in which she casts herself and the female critics and theorists she names in her letter — Maria La Place, Mary Ann Doane, and Lea Jacobs, all of whom have written about *Now, Voyager* — as women in melodrama. Like Lisa's letter in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, Modleski's letter seeks to show Cavell and the editors of *Critical Inquiry* that they — a group composed mostly of males — have participated in a structure of patriarchy embodied by Stefan Brand in Ophuls' film. Like Lisa's letter, Modleski's letter undertakes to unmask male blindness to women. Like Lisa's letter, Modleski's letter can be understood as written in order to deal a death-blow from which neither Cavell nor *Critical Inquiry* is expected to rise.

Modleski writes with assurance, assurance that her gesture speaks for more women than herself. There is in this sense an element of theatricality to her letter, since she is writing not only to Cavell and the editors, but *to* women as her audience, as well as *for* other women as their representative. Her letter expresses a sense of victory that, I take it, other women are expected to share. We are expected to feel our voices have been spoken for, our selves have been declared. I wonder, however, if this is the case, or if other women feel, as I do, that their voices are compromised by Modleski's letter, that she has spoken pre-emptively. Moreover I wonder if other women feel, as I do, that it is no more possible to take for granted that another woman speaks for *me* in these matters than it is to be assumed that a man speaks for me on serious matters.

This thought prompts a worry in me as a feminist, a long-standing worry that I trust is not mine alone. The worry is connected to the fact that, central to my feminism, and something feminism taught me to seek, is the authority of my own voice. My work as a feminist proceeds

from the understanding that appropriation of my voice, even by a women, and even by a feminist, requires my consent. I have to know for myself that I am being spoken for by that particular voice. And my being spoken for is not guaranteed by the label or umbrella of feminism, since feminism, as I practice it, derives its authority from repudiating the view that individual women have been fairly, and deeply, represented by the public voices of others. Feminism's exact challenge to patriarchy is to undo positions of authority, positions in which women are spoken *for*, as opposed to speaking for themselves.

But academic feminism in film studies seems to contain only two possibilities — feminist and anti-feminist. So my feminist search for and claim to the authority of my own voice in these matters gets me into trouble. When I raise my dissatisfaction with academic feminism [in film studies], I run the risk of being branded anti-feminist. Speaking from the heart, this pains me as much as it stupefies me. But then I think: it is this configuration of academic feminism [within film studies] of all-or-nothing, with us or against us, that is wrong, even artificial. It is wrong, and even artificial, insofar as it allows nothing but conformity and thus seems to me to represent something feminism itself, in the places I acquired it, gave me the courage to liberate myself from.

Even part of my subject today — Stanley Cavell — prompts a worry in me. I am a friend, and was a student, of Cavell's, a pair of facts that I am sure can lead people to think that I am here simply defending my friend and teacher. I do not deny that those are possible motivations. But I would want to say that I imagine most people in this room have, and have on occasion spoken out of, such attachments and that these attachments themselves, whether spoken of or not, are part of our enterprise. Furthermore, while I don't deny my connection to Cavell, I do deny that my private reasons are the *only* reasons I have for speaking of his work. Being Cavell's friend does not mean that I exempt his voice or his thought from investigation and scrutiny. In fact, our friendship takes place within — indeed, has at its core — the investigation of one another's work.

On the one hand, Modleski's charge against Cavell's work is embedded in the view that it is ensconced in venues of criticism, part of the dominant order. But film studies has never taken Cavell seriously. In fact, within film studies Cavell's work is notable chiefly for the degree of public aversion with which it has been met and for the words that have *not* been said about it. Modleski's letter suggests the opposite, suggests that the field has for too long engrossed itself in Cavell's thought about film. But, given that this is an insupportable picture, the surprise of Modleski's letter lies not in its demonstration that *now* Cavell's voice is *finally* to be banished from film studies. The surprise of Modleski's letter is its revelation that Cavell's writing is *now* being addressed.

I want to put Modleski's gesture in some perspective. There are hosts of male thinkers, routinely discussed within film studies, whose writing never elicits gestures of aggressive dismissal. Everyone employs Freud, for example, though elements of his views of women must be eternally overcome and adjusted. Scholars invoke Nietzsche, whose views on women are, to say the least, controversial. Over the past several years literary criticism has been at pains to come to grips with the controversial discovery of Paul de Man's involvement with Nazism because critics continue to find de Man's critical writing important. Heidegger's involvement with Nazism remains a deeply complicated, charged issue, yet scholars continue to investigate his writing, even

to find it essential to modern philosophy. Lacan is crucially cited, even though he has come under fire recently for being phallo-logo-centric in his thinking.

Now, I know what you're thinking: all of those men are dead, and who am I to rank Stanley Cavell with them anyway? Two eminently reasonable thoughts. But part of the reason I chose to mention those men is *because* they're dead. I really don't wish to make trouble [here today]. Rather, I wish to make a simple point: film studies, like most fields, commonly makes allowances in the texts it finds useful. And I chose these thinkers not to claim that Cavell belongs with them (something we surely can't know now), but to claim that *even* with thinkers of *this* order, we do not simply stop talking about them, and neither do we treat them with the aggressive silence urged in Modleski's letter.

So why Cavell? Modleski claims, on one level, that Cavell has invited banishment because in his writing he fails to cite others, that is, particular women writing about melodrama. She charges that because Cavell has not *named* the women who have written about film melodrama, he "wishes 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." The charge is pretty ugly. The question is, is it true?

A review of portions of Cavell's earlier writing demonstrates that the subjects of film melodrama are already embedded in his work, hence demonstrates that Cavell's turn to melodrama is fully anticipated. In fact, his most recent studies of melodrama call for being understood as elaborations and deepening of his earlier thinking. Thus the scandal that Modleski pictures as cause for Cavell's banishment from film studies is misrepresented. The scandal is that Cavell's work should be so tacitly shunned within film studies that the relation between his work on melodrama and his earlier writing should be unknown. These things said, it is perhaps the moment to ask: Is it any longer so obvious which party, Cavell or Modleski, is unknown?

The point of my upcoming, brief review of Cavell's anticipatory thoughts on the subjects of melodrama, specifically on the woman's unknownness or search for identity and the nature of silence, is not to ask for agreement about them. Nor do I ask that they replace other discussions of melodrama. Those are tasks of criticism and to be undertaken by particular critics in their writing. What I seek to demonstrate is: (1) Cavell has been drawn to the issues of melodrama from the start of his thinking about film, (2) that his thinking about the issues of melodrama is fully embedded in and informed by his philosophical thinking generally, and finally (3) that film studies is not in a position to foreclose the thought of Cavell's writing in advance of becoming readers of it.

In his reply to Modleski, Cavell states that the "philosophical obstacles" between their work "should not be underestimated." "Before all," he writes, "the persistence of two antagonistic traditions of academic philosophy, say German/French and English/American [is such an obstacle], since what academic feminist theory often means by philosophy (or theory) [develops] lines of French thought [and] is not what is meant by philosophy, is in some ways antithetical to what is meant [in American departments of philosophy]." Cavell addressed the schism between Anglo-American and Continental philosophical traditions in his first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?* And he addressed the tension between his philosophical thinking and its tradition and Continental thought again in 1981, in his essay, "The Politics of Interpretation: Politics As Opposed To What?"

Let me single out one passage of that essay where Cavell's reply to Modleski can be understood to be anticipated and where Cavell declares his understanding of the complex ways his philosophical thought differs importantly from French thought. French thought asserts, Cavell writes, "an appreciation of textuality, of its literariness, or rather of the originariness of its writtenness [and understands this feature of writing] [to] constitute, or require, a deconstruction of philosophy's bondage to a metaphysics of presence." In current film theory, both explicitly feminist and not explicitly feminist, it is doctrine that a metaphysics of presence, associated with maleness and with language or the Word, has been fully and comprehensively dismantled, chiefly by French thought. Film studies has endorsed the view that the capacity of speech to express a speaker's essence, his or her self, is merely an "illusion" fostered by Western metaphysics. But the idea that the self is an illusion has not and cannot conclusively dislodge the idea that there is a self, nor has it or can it dislodge the idea that the self can speak, can make itself known, can know itself. Yet it is the bedrock of most current film theory, as I understand it, to argue that this "illusion" of self within Western metaphysics is necessitated by the male need to replenish or mask his fear of castration, the fear that he may not be intact, may not be one. From this view, it cannot be clear, cannot be made out, where the feminine (self) or where (the selves of) women come into Western metaphysics or, we might say, into metaphysics in general.

In "Politics as Opposed to What," Cavell writes that "Derrida's sense, or intuition, that the bondage of metaphysics is a function of something called voice over something called writing" is not his view. "For me," Cavell declares, "it is evident that the reign of repressive philosophical systematizing — sometimes called metaphysics, sometimes called logical analysis — has depended upon the suppression of the human voice." (*Themes Out of School*, 48)

The repressive condition Cavell characterizes here as the suppression of the human voice is the subject of his study of film melodrama. His elaboration of this concept in his essay on *Now, Voyager*, for example, is preceded by his claim, in a 1985 essay, "Psychoanalysis and Cinema," that he is aware of "the possibility that philosophical skepticism is inflected, if not altogether determined, by gender, by whether one sets oneself aside as male or female. And if philosophical skepticism is thus inflected then, according to me, philosophy as such will be," ("Psychoanalysis and Cinema," *Images In Our Souls*, 31) — will be, that is, constructed so as to keep something, and something particularly feminine, untold, suppressed, silent.

But the subject of suppression, or silence, preoccupied Cavell long before it began to take shape within [and give shape to] the genre of film melodrama. In his 1969 essay on *King Lear*, he dwells on the nature and significance of Cordelia's silence. His study of Thoreau's *Walden*, published in 1972, concerns nothing so much as Thoreau's philosophical project of finding words for the world and for our condition of quiet (or perhaps silent?) desperation. Cavell's study of Kierkegaard (1969) interprets Kierkegaard's long night of the soul as, in part, a fathoming of theological silence, God's silence (something which now, fascinatingly, appears to be the subject of Julia Kristeva's recent work). Theological silence is also part of Cavell's essay on Beckett's *Endgame*, where he finds the play to be about words, speaking and silence.

The concluding chapter of Cavell's book of film theory, *The World Viewed*, published in 1971, is titled "The Acknowledgment of Silence." Among other things, it is a meditation on the self's acquisition of self-knowledge through self-betrayal by speaking, by breaking one's silence.

Cavell's more recent "What Photography Calls Thinking" (*Raritan*, Spring 1985) closes with a interpretation of Deeds' assumption of silence at the end of Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town*, which Cavell interprets, partly, as an expression of human unwillingness to participate in the farce of the human condition — or, I should say, to speak in a world that seems to have only one response to the desperateness of the human condition, and that is farce — and in such a world, one can choose insanity (silence) rather than sanity. Cavell's study of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, "Interpretation of Politics," is mostly about Coriolanus' silence ("The theme of silence haunts the play" [*Themes*, 85]) as an expression of the human capacity to withhold words. His essay on *The Winter's Tale* works through the issue of silence in relation to that play's pivotal figure of Hermione who, cast into a condition of silence or frozenness by Leontes' brutal verbal charges against her, comes back to life from her condition as a statue but, significantly, does not speak, even at the end.

This roster does not include other areas of Cavell's writing that take up the problematics of silence and speaking. The most direct philosophical writing by Cavell on issues of voice, speaking, naming, knowing, selfhood and otherness are to be found in his investigations of Austin and Wittgenstein, investigations that are studies of topics like: finding the right words for what we think and feel and know, the complexity of a common language, the limits of language. And we must add to this roster Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness*, which is principally a study of the conversation of Hollywood remarriage comedies of the thirties and forties, of this genre's carving out of the intimacies and abysses of conversation, of conversation's provisional offerings of provisional resolutions to the problem of other minds.

A related topic in Cavell's work, from the *King Lear* essay forward, is therapy. It is topic because of the condition of silence he understands to pervade not just philosophy, but culture generally. Thus, after his statement in "Politics As Opposed to What?" regarding the suppression of the human voice within philosophy, he writes, "[i]t is as the recovery of this voice (as from an illness) that ordinary language philosophy is, as I have understood and written about it, before all to be understood." (*Themes*, 48)

The recovery of the human voice as a problem of both metaphysics and skepticism could be understood as Cavell's central philosophical project. It is therefore not accidental that he finds himself in the realm of melodramas, such as *Now, Voyager*, in which recovery is itself the subject of the film. The subject emerged, perhaps even crystallized, in Cavell's 1972 study of Thoreau's *Walden*. *Walden* taught Cavell a lesson his investigation of Emerson's writing has deepened: That recovery of the self takes place only when we find our words and allow ourselves to speak our silences; conversely or paradoxically, when we allow ourselves to speak our silences, we are also allowing our silences to speak.

Feminist film theory understands the woman's silence to be imposed by Hollywood films, to be at the service of the needs of the male ego, necessitated by the construction of patriarchy. As his reply and other writing make amply clear, Cavell does not deny that these are outstanding possibilities. Silence *can* be imposed, and imposed for a host of reasons, some of which feminist film theory has specified and explored. But the work that has preoccupied Cavell is, the silence that calls for our condition as human to be known as one of suffering as from an illness, is not, or at least not simply, a silence imposed from outside ourselves. The idea is that we know or fail

to know ourselves in our silences, hence that we know or fail to know ourselves by speaking; the idea is that our silences are not (only) imposed from without, but from within; the idea is that what keeps us silent is not (only) the world, but ourselves, that we participate in keeping ourselves wordless.

The metaphysics of silence I have begun to excavate is a central subject of Cavell's writing. The work of recovering the voice involves the recognition that we impose silence on ourselves or participate in ways of keeping ourselves silent; paradoxically, our most familiar way of doing this is to cover our silence with words, for example words given to us by a theory rather than words originating from within our experience. So part of recovering the voice, as from an illness, is finding the right words for what we think and feel and know, and part of the recovery of the voice is an acknowledgment of the limits of our ability to know, hence our ability to speak. The metaphysics of silence is fundamental to our relation to film, hence to the medium of film. In Cavell's view, "[i]t is as though the world's projection explains our forms of unknownness and of our inability to know." (*TWV*, 40)

But now I have said enough to at least demonstrate that it is not possible to understand Cavell as simply appropriating a subject that belongs to others when he writes about film melodrama. What I have sketched of Cavell's work has perhaps made you feel that in order to understand his writing on melodrama, you have to read all of his writing. While I don't think such a project is to be rejected, I also don't think it's necessary if what you want to do is understand Cavell's thinking about film. As with other critical and theoretical writing, your engagement with it — how much you read — depends upon the extent to which you find it useful in your own thinking.

As for the difficulty of Cavell's writing, I cannot deny it. And maybe, at a later conference, we will be able to find ourselves talking about that. For the moment I wish only to point out that the texts film studies routinely relies upon are far from easy and accessible. Most of us have waded through the complexities of French thought without much knowledge of its sources and dealt with, in better and worse ways no doubt, the vagaries of translations, of second- and third-hand accounts, and the perplexity (to Americans) of French thought's philosophical origins.

What is to be gained from reading Cavell? Of course that question can only be answered for you by yourselves after you have read his work. I'll respond here only to the specific charge Modleski raises against Cavell in her letter, that he silences women. And I'll respond to it directly. He has not silenced *me*. In fact, his writing has been crucial to my discovery and development of my voice and thinking. I am not, in saying this, saying that Cavell's writing must or even can affect everyone this way. I am not — no one is — in a position to say that. But neither is anyone in a position to tell you that it *cannot* mean something to you. No one is in a position to dictate the places and films and sources and thinkers whose work means something to each of us; no one is in a position to tell us what counts and what doesn't, what's a discovery of our thinking and what isn't. If we relinquish the possibility of discoveries, if we allow others or allow ensconced theories to decide for us what's important, what paths have meaning, what words to speak we're lost: lost to one another, and perhaps more cataclysmically, lost to ourselves. And if we are lost in these ways, what have we to teach?<sup>1</sup>

**Note**

1. This paper and the paper by William Rothman were part of a panel at the 1991 Annual Meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies.