

Less Than Artful Conversations

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In his two recent books which survey the history of “theory” in film studies, David Rodowick (2014, 2015) argues for a “philosophy of the humanities” and a return to the work of Harvard philosopher, Stanley Cavell.

In *Elegy for Theory*, published in 2014, Rodowick only briefly mentions feminist film theory as part of the history of our field, but mostly relegates it in his account to identity politics and cultural studies. His first mention of feminism in relation to theory, for instance, occurs on page 201 in a book of 265 pages; and here, it is integrated as part of a longer list, including “formalism, myth criticism, Marxist criticism, psychoanalysis, feminism, queer theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, new historicism, cultural studies, media studies, and so on”. In his companion book, *Philosophy’s Artful Conversation*, published in 2015, Rodowick once again sidelines feminist theory, and in a remarkable move, especially for a book that contains no actual film analysis (which is true of the earlier book as well), he singles out one film in particular to show how Cavell’s approach might restore a philosophy of the humanities to film studies.

This move is remarkable on several counts. In 1990, Tania Modleski wrote (in a single paragraph) to the editors of *Critical Inquiry*, criticizing the journal for publishing Cavell’s essays on Bette Davis and *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), which were included in the journal’s 1989 issue. Modleski takes issue with the editorial board and with Cavell himself, since Cavell fails to cite any previous scholarship on the films he discussed. Modleski writes: “Inasmuch as Cavell, despite this specific charge against feminists, 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’” (Modleski, 1990: 239).

It is no small irony, then, that in the only extended film analysis he provides in either of his two recent books, Rodowick takes up *Now, Voyager* to demonstrate his Cavellian approach to film analysis. And just like Cavell decades earlier, Rodowick never mentions any feminist work on the film — not Mary Ann Doane (1987), or Lea Jacobs (1981), or Maria LaPlace (1987), or even more recent work by younger scholars, such as Alison McKee (2014). Instead, he writes: “In the recent past and still current context of theory, the temptation to apply a critical template that reads these films as narratives of the redomestication of women and the management of heteronormative desire is strong. But this would be too easy” (Rodowick, 2015: 256).

Too easy? Are issues, such as the redomestication of women and heteronormative desire, really so summarily dismissed? Even Cavell himself, writing (somewhat nervously) in response to Modleski, acknowledged the centrality of feminist film theory to film studies when he wrote: “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” (Cavell, 1990). How is it, then, that some twenty-five years later, feminist theory is nearly absent from Rodowick’s history of film theory and his philosophy of the humanities? What is at stake in this voluntary forgetting of feminist film theory’s centrality to film theory more generally? There is much to say about this, but not enough space here to do so in detail.¹ Suffice it to say that in far too many recent books and arguments, such as those offered by Rodowick, the casual dismissal and denigration of feminist theory carries institutional and disciplinary consequences and risks. In addition to passing on historical gaps to new generations of students and scholars alike, the practice of consigning feminist film theory to the dustbin of history or characterizing it as essentially anti-sex, anti-male, or simply not rigorously theoretical (as Rodowick does) ultimately encourages less critical, less historical scholarship — not to mention less than “artful” conversations.

¹ I address these issues in greater detail in a forthcoming essay, “Classical Feminist Film Theory: Then and (Mostly) Now,” in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender*, eds. Patrice Petro, E. Ann Kaplan, Kristin Hole, Dijana Jelaca (in progress). This statement is drawn from that longer essay.

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Filmography

Rapper I (dir) (1942) *Now, Voyager*. Warner Bros (prod).

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She was President of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (2007-2011). Professor Petro research focuses on film history, criticism, and theory, theories of modernism and modernity, internationalism and globalization, and feminist and critical theory. She is the author, editor, and co-editor of many publications, including: *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1989), *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History* (Rutgers University Press, 2002), *Rethinking Global Security: Media, Popular Culture, and the 'War on Terror'* (Rutgers University Press, 2006), *Idols of Modernity: Movie Stars of the 1920s* (Rutgers University Press, 2010), *Teaching Film* (Modern Language Association, 2011).