

3

Interpreting *All About Eve*: A Study in Historical Reception

Martin Shingler

During the 1940s, Bette Davis's particular brand of female strength, independence, professionalism, ambition and power appealed to millions of women in the United States and Britain, making her one of Hollywood's most successful stars. At the beginning of the next decade, however, in the film *All About Eve* (1950), the actress appeared to sacrifice all of these qualities in favour of housewifery. This chapter considers how this film has been received by audiences in Britain and the United States since the early 1950s. For this purpose, I am using the historical-materialist approach to film reception proposed by Janet Staiger as an alternative to both psychoanalytical theories of film spectatorship and to a much earlier stage of sociological audience research conducted, for example, by J. P. Mayer and Leo Handel, together with the work of Mass Observation.¹ This does not involve any aspect of ethnographic research, audience interviews, polls, discussion groups, etc., but entails analysis of extra-cinematic discourses including film reviews, publicity and film journalism, institutional practices such as casting and cultural, social and ideological discourses circulating at the time of the film's release or re-releases.

In her article 'The Handmaiden of Villainy: Methods and Problems in Studying the Historical Reception of a Film', Staiger states that the central purpose of her work is to determine not the 'correct' reading of a particular film but 'the range of possible readings and reading processes at historical moments and their relation to groups of historical spectators'.² Making a strong case against a generalised and idealised notion of the film spectator, 'devoid of networks of sexual, cultural, political, racial, cognitive and historical differences', she also argues against the use of traditional sociological or empirical analyses of individuals 'which only tell investigators what spectators thought they saw or felt or believed'.³ In *Interpreting Films* (1992), she observes:

reception studies research cannot claim to say as much about an actual reading or viewing experience by empirical readers or spectators as it might like. Several factors intervene between the event and any possible sense data available for its study. As any cognitive psychologist would point out, verbalized manifestations by a subject are not equal to the original experience or its memory. Reporting, whether through a crafted ethnographic interview or a published review, is always subject to the problem of retrieval, as well as to language, schemata, or representations of the subject that mediate perception, comprehension, and interpretation.⁴

Applying her own methodology to the analysis of the film *Foolish Wives* (1922), Staiger relied heavily upon contemporary reviews from newspapers and periodicals such as the *New York Times*, *Motion Picture Classic*, *Moving Picture World*, *Variety* and *Photoplay* in order to gauge the reaction of original viewers to this Hollywood film. She then located such reactions within a historical context of political and social events, movements and existing legislation. Finally, Staiger attempted to account for the harsh criticism which she discovered the film to have received on its initial release by speculating upon the way in which it conflated a number of fundamental binary oppositions (for example, American/European, masculine/feminine, hero/villain). She hypothesised that the film's conflation of conventional polarities would have been received as threatening by mass audiences in America in the early 1920s, thus accounting for the hostile reaction in the popular press. What emerged from Staiger's attempt to employ her methodology of historical reception to the 1922 film was that, despite the importance of data and evidence, the researcher must necessarily retain conjecture and supposition as primary tools of analysis and explanation. As she wrote in her article, 'a constant dialogue between theory and "evidence" is necessary'.⁵

Since the development of Staiger's approach to historical film reception, this methodology has found increasing acceptance within film studies, informing Barbara Klinger's proposal of a 'total film history'.⁶ It forms the basis of my approach to *All About Eve*, which aims to relate the events portrayed in the film, and the comments of reviewers, to wider cultural concerns at the time of its initial release, and particularly to public debate in the late 1940s and early 1950s on gender, sex roles and the 'woman problem'. I shall also examine the changing meanings and uses of this film from one historical moment to another, in particular the ways in which the determinants of meaning circulating around the film changed after 1960 when it began to be used and understood by gay audiences in alternative ways.

Written and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, *All About Eve* is a stylish melodramatic comedy, a highly verbose film about the theatre and its people. The plot is built around a volatile and vulnerable ageing actress, Margo Channing (played by Bette Davis), whose status as the theatre's greatest star is threatened and usurped by an ambitious and devious *ingénue*, Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter). In the course of the movie, Eve plots and schemes her way to the top of the New York theatrical world, transforming herself from 'just another tongue-tied fan' into Broadway's newest and brightest star. By the end of the film, she has won the coveted Sarah Siddons award for her achievements in the theatre. Margo, on the other hand, has given up the theatre to become, in her own words, a 'four-square, upright, downright, forthright married lady'. During the final scenes, the film is seen to resolve itself happily for Margo and unhappily for Eve, who (despite her success) is bitter, cynical and unloved. The original publicity for the film highlighted the fact that the narrative centres upon women and, more particularly, female relationships with men. Posters for the film declared that it was 'all about women – and their men'. The title itself was highly suggestive, not only naming one of the main characters but also evoking biblical references to the first woman, who was also, of course, the first problematic woman.

Despite such publicity, virtually none of the initial reviews in the major New York press nor the film magazines made any direct reference to the film's engagement with the 'woman problem'. Rather, the majority noted that the film was about the Broadway

theatre and that it featured some 'magnificent' performances from the principal actors, most notably, Bette Davis. Reviews also tended to stress the film's wit, maturity, sophistication and literacy or, less flatteringly, its verbosity.

On the film's American release in October 1950, Bosley Crowther's review in the *New York Times* applauded the film's wit, maturity, and its 'truly sterling cast'. He reserved his highest praise for Bette Davis, a 'brilliant screen actress' whose performance, in his opinion, merited an Academy award.⁷ Many British critics and reviewers would echo these sentiments when the film was released in Britain in December of the same year. Caroline Lejeune wrote in the *Observer* that

There are few actresses on the screen to-day who can beat Miss Davis at her best, and she is at her flaming best in this one. As a hard-working, impulsive, nerve-ridden theatre star of forty, who looks every year of her age and knows it, she uses no false aids to persuasion, nor pretends to youthful beauty she has lost if she ever had it. By sheer integrity of performance, by thinking deeply about the woman she is playing, by using all the technical tricks she has learnt in her long career as a public entertainer, she magnificently suggests an actress who must inevitably dominate any stage, and still, with all her tantrums, inspire loyalty and affection off it. When Miss Davis disappears from the screen, a reel or so before the end of the film, the fire seems to go out and the embers die, although they flare up again at last with a teasing little splutter.⁸

Lejeune's words convey a strong sense of her delight in Davis's early appearances in the film, suggesting that she found the actress both compulsive viewing and hugely entertaining. For her, Davis dominated the film, commanding her full attention and sympathy and creating a strong identificatory relationship.

Similarly, in her review of the movie for *Films in Review* in December 1950, Ann Griffith declared that

It is wonderful to find oneself on Bette Davis's side at last. To cry when she cries, to long to have her laugh and be happy, to sympathize with her troubles and tantrums, and to rejoice when she gets her man, is certainly a novel experience.⁹ [My italics]

Griffith's comment indicates that she found Davis's ultimate act of self-sacrifice in giving up her acting career a cause for rejoicing. On the evidence of these reviews, the film's depiction of a woman's marriage-career conflict, in which true satisfaction was achieved through housewifery and domestication rather than a highly successful career (involving fame, wealth and independence), appears to have appealed to some members of its original audience. If we consider this film within the context of American and British society in 1950 we can understand why such a reaction to the film might be the case. By 1950, many millions of women in America and Britain had left jobs and given up independent lifestyles to embrace marriage and motherhood. Many of these women might have been gratified to witness one of Hollywood's greatest female movie stars taking a similar step in *All About Eve*, accepting the assurance the film offered them that, in swapping the office or the factory floor for the kitchen or the nursery, they had done the right thing.

There is, however, evidence to suggest that this was not the only way in which women

responded to Davis's actions at the end of *All About Eve*. Writing in the popular British journal *Picture Post* on 9 December 1950, Catherine de la Roche described the film's ending as 'dangerously romantic'.¹⁰ Her choice of words not only suggests that the film's conclusion (and its message to women) might be regarded as both unrealistic and idealistic, but also implies that such a solution could be both damaging and destructive. The sense that, for some women, the ending of the movie was more troubling than reassuring was also implicit in Lejeune's review, in which she recorded a sudden and serious loss of attention and pleasure when Davis herself disappeared from the screen, having supposedly withdrawn into the seclusion of married life. Having announced her character's decision to marry, Davis only appears once more in the film for a brief moment to deliver one line (presumably Lejeune's 'teasing little splutter') in which she tells Eve to put her award where her heart should be.



All About Eve (1950): having renounced her successful stage career in favour of marriage, Margo Channing (Bette Davis) tells Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter) not to worry about her heart as she can always put her award where her heart should be

In my research I have only come across one review from the time of *All About Eve*'s original release which makes any overt reference to the film's sexual politics. This was published in a relatively minor – and certainly marginal – journal with a small and discerning readership. *Film Sense* described itself as 'A progressive journal of film news and opinion, published by the Film Division of the New York State Council of Arts, Sciences and Professions', and promoted itself as 'A hard-hitting antidote for Hollywood pap'. At one point, it was endorsed by the *National Guardian* as 'America's outstanding film magazine'. As well as publishing reviews of 'serious' film books such as Hortense

Powdermaker's *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*,¹¹ the magazine featured articles primarily concerned with issues such as the representation of race, violence, religion, war (including atomic warfare), minority groups and male supremacy. It regularly reviewed European as well as contemporary American films (independent productions on 16 mm as well as major Hollywood releases) and was clearly aimed at a left-wing intelligentsia rather than a mass readership. Consequently, it was very different in style and content to the vast majority of commercial mainstream film publications. So far as its review of *All About Eve* is concerned, the magazine certainly responded differently to the film than any of the major film journals or newspapers.

Entitled 'Nothing About Eve' and written jointly by Vanna and Jay Starr, *Film Sense's* review debated the merits of the movie, with Vanna on the attack and Jay in defence. At one point in their exchange, Jay told Vanna, 'Be glad they didn't have the career woman ending up over a hot stove, or telephoning diaper service.'¹² Vanna responded:

You think there was no male supremacy? Find me one career woman in the film who didn't have either an alcohol or neurotic jag. Bette Davis, the ageing actress, was over-ripe for Dr Franzblau's couch. And Eve was biting everyone else's nails besides her own. Only Celeste Holm, the playwright's wife, was a happy woman. That's because she was content to remain domesticated and bask in her husband's success. I didn't see her darning his socks or broiling his lamb chops, but I'm sure she handled the maid and the butler with the true instincts of the professional man's spouse.¹³

Vanna reinforced her charge of inherent sexism at the very end of the article:

VANNA: Maybe you won't think I'm being petty or too female-conscious, if I mention one other example of discrimination. You remember how, in the end that pretty little monster begins the cycle all over again by winning her way into the now-successful Eve's home. Again it's a female who's the conniver. Never do any of the male theatrical professionals hit below the belt.

JAY: OK. But will you admit that if we know nothing about Eve, we do know ...

VANNA: I've changed my mind. We do know a little about Eve, but we know too much about Hollywood.¹⁴

In the process of airing their different opinions of *All About Eve*, Vanna and Jay Starr established an alternative reading of the movie, very different from those that had appeared in the popular press. At the same time, they articulated a crucial tension between what might be thought of as 'sophisticated' or 'innocent' readings of the film. That *All About Eve* should simultaneously elicit both sophisticated and innocent readings is not a unique feature of this movie but rather, as Richard Maltby has suggested, a fairly typical aspect of the classical Hollywood film.¹⁵ In his essay 'A Brief Romantic Interlude': Dick and Jane Go to Three and a Half Seconds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema', Maltby has demonstrated how Hollywood movies 'presuppose multiple viewpoints, at multiple textual levels, for their consuming audience'.¹⁶ He analyses a brief scene from *Casablanca* (1942), and describes the reactions of two hypothetical historical American viewers, Dick and Jane, who disagree over the significance of the scene. In this account, the male viewer performs a 'sophisticated' reading – reading into

Casablanca elements that are not explicit in the movie – while the female viewer defends an 'innocent' reading of the film which accepts the scene at face value and no more. Nevertheless, while Jane might be regarded as an 'innocent' reader of the film, Maltby notes that not only does she have her own reasons for defending her reading of the film (involving a vested interest) but that her reading has its own degree of sophistication, drawing as it does on her knowledge of Ingrid Bergman's star persona. Dick's 'sophisticated' reading, on the other hand, draws upon his knowledge of the Production Code and censorship, which he uses to argue in favour of a meaning that must remain hidden or discrete. Maltby argues that *Casablanca* 'quite deliberately constructs itself in such a way as to offer distinct and alternative sources of pleasure to two people sitting next to each other in the same cinema'.¹⁷ This process would ensure the greatest economic returns for a film on the grounds that it could appeal equally (but differently) to very different types of people. One consequence of this would be, as Maltby points out, that the ideological coherence of the film would be reduced. In short, the greater the scope for audiences to derive their own meanings from a particular film, the less scope for that movie to present a cogent message. However, as Maltby writes:

To some extent this contradiction between textual construction and ideological project, between economic efficiency and ideological affect, is contained by the way in which alternative possibilities are subsumed within relatively crude binary categories, of which my division of audiences by gender would be a case in point.¹⁸

The creation of specifically defined gendered reading positions, that is one set of meanings for female spectators and another for male spectators, presupposes a certain degree of ideological coherence. Maltby's thesis would suggest that not only does *All About Eve* articulate distinct male and female meanings, but also that its failure to sustain a coherent ideological position on, for instance, the 'woman problem', is partially disguised by what is assumed to be different gender reactions to the issues played out on the screen.¹⁹

Vanna and Jay Starr's disagreement over the meaning of *All About Eve* is not, however, identical to that articulated in Maltby's account of Dick and Jane's argument over the meaning of *Casablanca*. In the Starrs' dispute, the female adopts the 'sophisticated' reading position. More crucially, the Starrs are eventually reconciled on an agreed assessment of the film. In fact, it would seem that their disagreement was primarily rhetorical and was mainly staged in order to provide support for the views articulated by Vanna. After exchanging their interpretations of *All About Eve*, Jay allowed himself to be persuaded by Vanna's suggestion that the film was inherently sexist in the way it presented its female characters, while Vanna backed down from saying that the film told its audience nothing about Eve. In the process of settling this dispute between the two, an interpretation of the film that would now be called feminist was articulated. Although such an interpretation was subsequently widely adopted by critics and historians, in 1950 it constituted a marginal view – in Stuart Hall's terminology, a 'resistant reading'. Hence, perhaps, the cautious tactic of revealing such insights by way of an argument, charting the gradual transformation of a sceptical male critic who is eventually persuaded to accept the inherent sexual discrimination of a Hollywood movie.

Thirteen years later, at a formative stage of the post-war women's liberation move-

ment, Betty Friedan, in her groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), described the ways in which American women had been lured back to the home after World War II. In particular, she noted how the heroines of women's magazine fiction were transformed from the 'New Woman' of 1939 (happy in, and proud of, her career) to the professional woman who, in 1949, decided to give up her career to become a housewife.²⁰ Clearly, Margo's renunciation of her career in *All About Eve* echoed the scenarios of magazine fiction at that time, while it shared its basic plot situation with several contemporaneous films starring actresses who had, like Davis, achieved stardom in the early 1930s.²¹ By the 1980s, indeed, the film was regarded by film historians as a classic example of the reactionary and anti-feminist tendencies of 1950s Hollywood cinema. In *American Film Since 1945* (1984), Leonard Quart and Albert Auster discuss the film in terms of its 'typically' reactionary approach to the subject of female emancipation, understanding it not only to be representative of Hollywood's treatment of the 'woman problem' but also symptomatic of post-war American society itself.²² In their account, the film demonstrates the patriarchal tendencies both of Hollywood cinema of the 1950s and American post-war society in general. My own concern in this chapter, however, is to understand the ways in which it corresponded or connected with social and cultural discourses in America and Britain from the time of its release in 1950. Alongside trends in film, popular literature, journalism and broadcast radio and television, *All About Eve* circulated within a particular set of social and ideological discourses. At the time of its release, such discourses included quasi-scientific theories of femininity, for example Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg's influential book *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947), which provided the rationale for so many Americans to base their attack upon feminists and career women in the late 1940s and early 1950s.²³

The main theme of this book was that women constituted one of the main unsolved social problems in America during the late 1940s. In the foreword, Lundberg wrote that

The central thesis of this book is that contemporary women in very large numbers are psychologically disordered and that their disorder is having terrible social and personal effects involving men in all departments of their lives as well as women. It is by no means an a priori thesis, which the authors have set out to prove, but is a conclusion arrived at and resting on clinical work in psychiatry carried on over a long period by Dr Marynia F. Farnham of New York. Many involved case histories, of men as well as of women, underlie the broad prospect unfolded in this book, although it is not a collection of case histories but a general psychosocial study of women and the recent historical changes that have affected their personal lives, materially for the better but psychologically for the worse.²⁴

Drawing upon Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly that of Helene Deutsch,²⁵ Farnham and Lundberg attempted to prove that women were by nature passive, dependent, maternal and home-loving and that only motherhood and marriage could ever make a woman's life meaningful and satisfying. A woman's career, they argued, was directly at odds with her femininity (that is, her true nature) and invariably resulted in her development of masculine characteristics, leading to unhappiness, frustration and, ultimately, illness. Thus, after the end of World War II, Farnham and Lundberg informed

women of the dangers of work outside the home, providing government officials, educators, religious leaders, employers and others with what appeared to be a scientific basis for anti-feminism and, more specifically, for the removal of women from the workplace at a time of rising levels of unemployment. At the same time, Farnham and Lundberg helped to demonise the 'modern woman' – a stereotype of the working woman created particularly during World War II, when millions of women had taken over the civilian duties of the men drafted into the armed services.

Farnham and Lundberg described the modern woman as a chimera: the she-monster of Greek mythology, with a lion's head vomiting flames, and a serpent's tail. This she-devil, they argued, was man's rival (rather than companion) who, in her working life, had developed 'the characteristics of aggression, dominance, independence and power'.²⁶ These qualities were increasingly removing women from their 'true' state, essentially motherhood, and driving them 'steadily deeper into personal conflicts soluble only by psychotherapy'.²⁷ For the sake of their own well-being (if not for the good of their husbands or the nation), women were urged to give up their careers and embrace motherhood and domestication. The work of Farnham and Lundberg had a tremendous impact in the United States during the initial post-war period. William Chafe, in his book *The American Woman* (1972), observed that

Lundberg and Farnham had clearly touched on an issue of great interest, for within a brief period of time the theme they established was echoed by others. As might have been expected, women's magazines led the list of supporters, and the joys of 'femininity' and 'togetherness' became the staple motifs of periodicals like *McCall's* and the *Ladies Home Journal*.²⁸

However, while dominant discourses were extolling the virtues of femininity and domestication for women, others were highlighting its dangers and frustrations. In fact, the anti-feminism of Farnham and Lundberg only represents one side of what was actually a hotly-debated issue. Other researchers and writers sought to demonstrate the similarities between the sexes and also the social rather than biological nature of gender. For instance, Margaret Mead's anthropological study *Male and Female* (first published in 1950) highlighted the extent to which qualities such as aggression, courage, dominance, passivity and gentleness were determined by environmental conditions and child-rearing techniques rather than acquired 'naturally' by one or other of the sexes.²⁹ Mead in fact referred directly (and slightly) to *Modern Woman* in her book:

Literature in the United States at the present is raucous and angry on this whole question of the relationship between men and women. We have had a spate of books that claim women are being masculinized, to their ill, to men's ill, to everybody's ill ... When one follows the shrill insistentcies of books like *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, which end by attacking men as well as women, one realizes that we are passing through a period of discrepancies in sex roles which are so conspicuous that efforts to disguise the price that both sexes pay are increasingly unsuccessful ... As surely as we believe that the present troublesome problems of sex adjustment are due to the possibilities of women alone, we commit ourselves to a long series of false moves as we attempt to push women out of the home, into the home, out of the home, adding mounting

confusion to the difficulties born of a changing world-climate of opinion, a shifting technology, and an increasing rate of violence of cultural change.³⁰

Other dissenting voices could also be heard in the field of journalism. For example, Mary McCarthy's scathing review of Farnham and Lundberg's book in *The New Yorker* rendered their arguments both disingenuous and contentious.³¹ 'In the intellectual sphere', McCarthy argued, 'the Lundberg-Farnham argument remains purely contentious. No jot of evidence is brought forward to support the crucial proposition ... For the disingenuousness of this kind of reasoning that uses its own hypothesis as proof, that appeals always to the authority of "facts" and allows itself at the same time the anarchy of interpretation, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* offers an unforgettable illustration.'³²

Though such dissent may have been largely marginal (that is, confined to a learned and 'highbrow' readership) and almost completely drowned out by the feature writers of *Ladies Home Journal* and *Life*,³³ nevertheless, the existence of alternative discourses on the issues of womanhood and femininity within American and British culture during the late 1940s and 1950s provided a context in which *All About Eve* could be read 'against the grain' or, at the very least, represent the site of a struggle over meaning, such as that suggested by the Starrs' review in *Film Sense* – even if such alternative readings of *All About Eve* in 1950 and 1951 were really only available to a middle-class left-wing readership.

While these alternative readings were not simply determined by gender, the latter did play a crucial role in generating distinct and different readings of *All About Eve*, principally in relation to the audience's capacity to interpret Margo Channing's actions according to their knowledge of Bette Davis as a star. As Barbara Leaming wrote in her 1992 biography, Davis, 'the most potent symbol of wartime female independence and self-sufficiency appeared suddenly [in *All About Eve*] to accept and even recommend the retrograde sexual politics of the 1950s.'³⁴ It could be argued that Davis's star persona demonstrated the full scale of the country's U-turn on gender roles since the late 1930s and early 1940s. By refashioning a real-life actress famed (and once celebrated) for her dedication to work and for her independent, fighting spirit into the character of an actress prepared to sacrifice all for home and husband, the film might be seen as showing how even the most 'modern' of women could successfully be transformed into one of the most traditional and conservative. On the other hand, Davis's 'modern woman' persona might have been resilient enough not only to withstand the film's ending but also to render it unbelievable or ironic. Some members of the audience (namely, her staunchest fans) might well have been able to read and even enjoy the ironies of this spectacle and interpret these actions as untenable, as the stuff of myth or (Hollywood/male) fantasy.

Davis's casting in *All About Eve* would have certainly played a crucial role in determining the ways in which audiences made sense of the actions of her character, Margo Channing. Her star persona, the characteristics of 'Bette Davis' established through publicity, news, interviews, biographies and gossip, in combination with the legacy of her previous screen roles, necessarily played an integral part in the meaning system of *All About Eve*. Davis's identity as a star was associated with female independence and even feminism, two traits repeatedly reflected and celebrated in the films she made for

Warner Bros. throughout the 1930s and 1940s. This is something that has often been commented on by critics, biographers and film historians. Written in 1966, Henry Hart's comments are fairly typical:

The part of our *Zeitgeist* which Miss Davis' screen image subserved is feminism.

Which is not to say that Miss Davis' films have been overt feminist propaganda. What is meant is this: in her every role audiences sensed an exemplar of 'the new woman'. The result was women had a double pleasure watching her since, in addition to a good acting performance, they saw one of their own confront the male with a new independence, as well as with the immemorial web.

Why did men like her? I am not sure they did, *really* ... Some knowing men of my acquaintance enjoyed watching the phenomenon of Bette Davis herself – a not especially good-looking girl, slightly ex-ophthalmic in fact – getting away with an arrogance that had *what* to back it up?

The 'what' is described by Miss Davis' admirers and detractors. The latter are voluble about her ... 'masculine protest'; about, in fact, almost everything except the things Miss Davis' admirers emphasize – intelligence, self-discipline, capacity for hard work and, above all, ambition.³⁵

As this appraisal of Davis's appeal by a male critic indicates, not only did men and women have very different responses to Bette Davis, but those men who professed to like her found it difficult to explain why. Some men's delight in the image of Davis contains a suggestion of masochism, since she so often either destroys men or manages perfectly well without them in her films. It is, moreover, the 'knowing men' of this critic's acquaintance who appreciate her.³⁶ The majority of Bette Davis's fans were, as they had been throughout the war years, female. However, whereas during the war the actress and her studio could count on high returns at the box office from her devoted following of American and British female fans, after the war circumstances altered dramatically, since the male viewers who accompanied their wives and girlfriends to the cinema may not have wished to see a 'rebellious and threatening figure like Bette Davis.'³⁷ Stripping the Davis persona of her power and independence at the end of *All About Eve* possibly sent reassuring signals to male viewers. The same spectacle may not, however, have received such a favourable reaction from her female fans, given that this ending so crucially undermined those aspects of her star persona which had won her such devoted favour among women during the early 1940s.

Although significant numbers of women no doubt shared with male viewers the pleasure of seeing Davis 'come to her senses' and opt for marriage over career, for large numbers of women, the ending would have been a disappointment. For some, like Catherine de la Roche, it was both unrealistic and damaging. For those like Caroline Lejeune, it dampened out the fires which had burned so brightly. Others, like Vanna Starr, found the film's treatment of female characters not only disappointing but offensive. Many women must have shared Vanna Starr's fury at the film's depiction of ambitious women as conniving little monsters who 'hit below the belt' and thus deserved their fates as lonely, embittered and sexually frustrated neurotics. If the movie suggested that career women were ripe for the couch of Dr Marynia Farnham and could only avoid such treatment by giving up everything in order simply to bask in their hus-

band's glory as the dutiful spouses of professional men, Vanna Starr's commentary showed that, as a professional, left-wing woman, she could both see through and reject the anti-feminist message of *All About Eve*. Clearly, *All About Eve* did not provoke a coherently 'female view' (in opposition to a 'male view'), given that published opinions of female reviewers and critics were so various and contradictory. The film was too ambivalent for this, particularly for those viewers who recognise the contradictions involved in the relationship between the star persona of Bette Davis and her character Margo Channing.

The ambiguities, contradictions and ironies which emerged largely as a result of the casting of Bette Davis as Margo Channing would have lasting appeal to 'knowing' audiences in later years and, increasingly, much of the writing about this film would eventually come to highlight its duplicities and ambiguous qualities, securing it a prominent place within, for instance, gay culture. The publication in 1973 of an article by Lawrence J. Quirk entitled 'The Cult of Bette and Joan: The True Reasons Why They Drive Homosexuals Wild' clearly suggests the extent to which Davis's gay appeal had been noted by critics, commentators and regular film-goers by the early 1970s.³⁸ According to Quirk:

For years now, a great deal has been made of the homosexuals' addiction to Bette Davis and Joan Crawford and their films. Transvestites, female impersonators and campy types of all descriptions and traditions ape Davis mannerisms and shout 'Peter, The Letter!' and 'You disgust me, you worm!'³⁹

Quirk pointed out that, for some years, it had been generally believed that 'some kind of frenzied, high-camp, super-comical element was involved in this Gay preoccupation' and that, according to this theory, Bette Davis (along with several other major Hollywood actresses) 'mirrored certain frenzied, self-projective, super-compensating principles that psychologists and psychiatrists have spotted in more aggressive and flamboyant homosexuals, especially those in showbusiness'.⁴⁰

However, Quirk proposed a 'deeper' meaning for the Davis mania among gays and his article was devoted to exploring this in more detail, concentrating on the appeal for closeted gay viewers:

One fact of 1973 is that appearances tell nothing. Here I am not concerned with the iceberg-tip of 'fag prima donnas' but with the typical cross-section homosexual, in or out of showbusiness. Why does *he* get a bang out of old Bette-Joan movies? The answer is really quite simple. For in their top films of yore, Davis and Crawford were usually in aggressive, intent pursuit of one or all of three things: men, money and power. These three drives motivate the lives of most homosexuals I have known.⁴¹

At one point Quirk argues that

it is not being 'Anti-Gay' to state that many homosexuals are quite sad and lost people. And the great Davis-Crawford movies were often about sad and lost people with whom they could identify. The Crawford-Davis films, besides mirroring subtle forms of unhappiness and restless detours from the positive life-force, often possessed a negative

intensity that reached super-masochistic heights, proving therapeutic to many a tormented Gay.⁴²

So far as *All About Eve* was concerned, Quirk found the film's core to consist of

Davis and Anne Baxter battling for men and careers; Davis at 40 hates Baxter because she's 24 (the Gay Obsession with Youth); doublecrossings, bitcheries of all descriptions, nasty verbal exchanges, putdowns, ego ripoffs – all gleefully purgative to Gays whose past, present and future are full of this kind of ego-game activity in which Power is as important a prize as Sex.⁴³

Although Quirk's piece is highly individualistic and sheds very little light on the real reasons why gay men have become such devoted fans of Bette Davis and her films, his essay does foreground the subject of Davis's gay appeal. It also suggests, at least implicitly, a desire for Davis to be reclaimed by heterosexual audiences since the article itself seems rooted in Quirk's personal frustration that his own favourite films should also appeal so strongly to what he calls the 'lunatic fringe of flamboyant "queens"'.⁴⁴ This sentiment is clearest in the final paragraph of his essay, where he describes how his recent viewing of *All About Eve* at the Waverley Movie Theater in Greenwich Village, New York City, had been interrupted by the 'savage screams and whistles and stampings of a largely Gay audience'.⁴⁵ His article ends with what is little short of a plea for gay audiences to leave Bette Davis alone – to leave her, indeed, to those (like himself) who are truly capable of admiring her.

As well as suggesting that Bette Davis's gay appeal was well established by the time of the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Quirk's article also indicates that gay men had begun to construct their own readings of her films and saw their own lives and experiences expressed in the subtexts of these films. In the process, a struggle over meaning appeared to be forming between straight and gay fans over which group constituted the 'true' or 'sophisticated' audience for her films.⁴⁶ With the increasing visibility of gay people as a result of the gay liberation movement, it must have seemed that the members of this newly emergent yet still marginal social group were establishing their own cultural identity by appropriating aspects of mainstream culture and 'dragging them down to their level'. According to such a view, products of the dominant culture, such as the Hollywood films of Bette Davis, would seem to have been appropriated by the gay community, acquiring a range of new meanings in the process. But a number of gay writers have subsequently claimed that, in the case of *All About Eve*, the gay meanings were there from the start, and that this was less a matter of gay audiences choosing to read (or wilfully misread) these movies in a gay way than of them recognising these inherent meanings in spite of the fact that, until the 1970s, the majority of professional reviewers and critics had failed to acknowledge such meanings in print.

In 1981, Vito Russo described the inherent gayness of *All About Eve* in *The Celluloid Closet*, noting the ways in which two of the principal characters, Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter) and Addison de Witt (George Sanders) were implicitly homosexual. He referred to the critic Addison de Witt as not only 'suave and lethal' but also as a 'symbol of sophisticated decadence'⁴⁷ and described Eve as a 'subliminally gay character', commenting

upon her 'boyish' looks and referring to her as 'a sort of malevolent Huck Finn'.⁴⁶ Russo even claimed that the reason for her ultimate downfall was her lesbianism:

According to writer-director Mankiewicz, her vulnerability in the last scene to another conniving woman is the result of physical attraction. Eve does not have the kind of generosity that led Margo Channing (Bette Davis) to take a waif like her under her wing. To ask Phoebe (Barbara Bates) to spend the night rather than take the subway home to Brooklyn could only have one motive, and it spelt the beginning of the end for Eve Harrington.⁴⁹

This is an example of the way in which gay writers, by the 1980s, were highlighting the underlying homosexuality of the film, inviting gay viewers to read more into the scenarios of this and other Hollywood films.

There is, however, evidence to suggest that viewers had in reality been making such readings since the 1960s. For instance, Ken Geist, in his biography of Joseph L. Mankiewicz, *Pictures Will Talk* (1978), noted that the director had informed him that from about 1968 he had begun to receive fan mail enquiring about the gay subtext of the film. In a footnote, Geist included the following statement:

Mankiewicz says that only within the past five years [i.e. 1968–73] has his mail reflected viewers comprehending the significance of Eve and her room-mate in night clothes, linking arms as they ascend the staircase. By revealing Eve's mannishly cropped hair after she removes her curled stage wig, and by having Eve suggest that Phoebe stay the night rather than make the long subway trip home, Mankiewicz subtly suggests Eve's Sapphic nature.⁵⁰

Geist's comment suggests that Mankiewicz had encoded these meanings in details of *mise-en-scène* and character action.

By the 1990s, *All About Eve* was circulating in a context where homosexuality had attained a high media profile and with considerable literature publicly available on the subject, designed to appeal to a (lucrative) gay market. The film not only came to feature prominently in gay textbooks⁵¹ but also in other media texts, including three cinematic gay reworkings of the film: an avant-garde short by American gay film-maker Jerry Tartaglia;⁵² a gay pornographic video pastiche called *All About Steve*;⁵³ and a Spanish art-house homage by Pedro Almodóvar called *All About My Mother*.⁵⁴ In recent years, gay writers, film-makers and historians have both celebrated and reinscribed the gay significance of *All About Eve*, creating a context for audiences to recognise its gay meanings.⁵⁵

This chapter began with a discussion of the earliest reviews of *All About Eve* in the United States and Britain. I found that what had struck me as the most significant aspect of the movie, namely its engagement with the 'woman problem', went largely unspoken in these reviews. This alerted me to the existence of a structuring absence in the way that mainstream reviews shifted the meanings of the film away from those indicated by its narrative, title and original publicity. Despite the fact that the film was promoted as being 'all about women – and their men', the majority of the reviewers in 1950 avoided such a contentious and divisive topic at a time when, as one contemporary

commentator noted, much of America was 'raucous and angry on this whole question of the relationship between men and women'.⁵⁶ Vanna and Jay Starrs' critique of the film in *Film Sense* represents an exception to the way *All About Eve* was originally reviewed and marks the early formation of 'alternative' or 'resistent' readings of the movie.

These strategies by mainstream reviewers and critics were tantamount to removing the film from its social and cultural context. What this suggests is that an examination of the dominant discourses which cluster around a film (most notably, publicity, advertising, reviews, journalistic features, star and director interviews, etc.) provide only a partial indication of a film's meaning. In other words, a historiographical approach to film reception that is dependent upon reviews and journalistic features in mainstream publications is limited to revealing the construction of dominant or 'preferred' meanings. Resistant, negotiated or alternative readings may emerge when marginal discourses are available for investigation or when a diachronic approach is used; that is, an examination of subsequent rereading and reinterpretations by commentators, writers, scholars and fans from different historical moments and from different social or cultural sections of society. Any review, of course, inevitably leaves something unsaid and, as this chapter has confirmed, what is left out of public discourse can be as fruitful for analysis as what is included. Identifying and accounting for the unspoken is thus an important part of the historian's task. This is particularly true, of course, for feminist and gay historians of film reception who seek to identify the meanings of films from a time when feminism and homosexuality were unacceptable subjects for public discourse. *All About Eve* suggests that, for all its sophisticated talk, its most critical messages went unspoken and remained so until the context available for interpretation changed.

Notes

- 1 J. P. Mayer, *Sociology of Film* (New York: Arno Press, 1972, first published in 1946) and *British Cinema and Their Audiences* (New York: Arno Press, 1978, first published in 1948); Leo Handel, *Hollywood Looks at its Audience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950); Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).
- 2 Janet Staiger, 'The Handmaiden of Villainy: Methods and Problems in Studying the Historical Reception of a Film', *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1986), p. 20.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 26.
- 4 Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 79–80.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 6 Barbara Klinger, 'Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies', *Screen*, vol. 38, no. 2 (summer 1997), pp. 107–28. Klinger writes that 'the grand view behind a *histoire totale* has several valuable functions for film history' and embraces 'a scholarly aim rather than an absolutely achievable reality' (pp. 108–9). Like Staiger, she allocates a significant role to extra-cinematic materials, such as advertising and publicity, reviews and criticism, star interviews and features in film journals, fanzines, the popular press and lifestyle magazines but acknowledges that 'questions of history must extend beyond the industry to engage in a potentially vast system of interconnections, from the film and its immediate industrial context to social and historical developments' (p. 111).

- 7 Bosley Crowther, *New York Times* (14 October 1950), p. 13.
- 8 Caroline A. Lejeune, 'A Star at Eve', *Observer* (10 December 1950), p. 6.
- 9 Ann Griffith, *Films in Review*, vol. 1, no. 9 (December 1950), pp. 37–8.
- 10 Catherine de la Roche, *Picture Post* (9 December 1950), p. 18.
- 11 Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood: The Dream Factory* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1950).
- 12 Vanna and Jay Starr, 'Nothing About Eve', *Film Sense*, vol. 1, no. 6 (October 1950), p. 8.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Richard Maltby, '“A Brief Romantic Interlude”: Dick and Jane Go to Three and a Half Seconds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema', in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) pp. 434–59.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 436.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 443.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 444.
- 19 However, one could say that a film theorist's project of assigning alternative readings of a film to male and female viewpoints – as I am doing here with Vanna and Jay Starr's reading of *All About Eve* – obscures in the process the extent to which the film itself presents an ideologically incoherent or even contradictory message. Thus, while it may appear that *All About Eve* offers conflicting meanings and pleasures to male and female audiences by enabling them to interpret differently, another view might suggest that such diverse readings and pleasures emerge because the film actually expresses or represents the ambivalent or contradictory aspects of gender ideology at a specific historical moment.
- 20 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), pp. 38–44.
- 21 Between 1946 and 1954, for example, Ginger Rogers appeared in four films playing a major stage or screen star, in professional or personal competition with a much younger woman: *Weekend at the Waldorf* (1946); *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949); *Forever Female* (1953); *Black Widow* (1954).
- 22 Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film Since 1945* (London: MacMillan, 1984) p. 55.
- 23 Marynia F. Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947). Dr Marynia Farnham was a psychologist and Ferdinand Lundberg a sociologist. The book originally cited the authors as Lundberg and Farnham, lending more prominence to the name of the male scholar. This may have been intended to reflect his greater input into the actual writing of the book, which implies simultaneously that Farnham's input was primarily concerned with the provision of 'clinical evidence'. The precedence of Lundberg's name might have been due to his more well-known reputation as an author, having previously published two books. It could also have been, of course, because he was male. This would certainly have been in keeping with the general philosophy of the book. However, the common practice for citing this book now is to reverse the order of the authors' names and list them alphabetically. Most bibliographical entries now refer to the authors as Farnham and Lundberg and the book is currently catalogued by the British Library in this way.
- 24 *Ibid.*, Foreword, p. v.

- 25 Helene Deutsch's book *The Psychology of Women: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (New York: Grune and Stratton) was first published in 1944. Deutsch linked female sexuality to an inherently masochistic drive and tendency which supported notions of their willing (and natural) subjugation to male supremacy or dominance.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1920–70* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 206.
- 29 Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1950).
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 300.
- 31 Mary McCarthy, 'The Tyranny of the Orgasm' (April 1947), reprinted in *On the Contrary: Articles of Belief 1946–61* (London: Heinemann, 1962), pp. 167–73.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 171–3.
- 33 Not until the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) would such dissension reach a wider and more popular audience in the United States and Britain.
- 34 Barbara Leaming, *Bette Davis: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992), p. 202.
- 35 Henry Hart, foreword to Gene Ringgold, *The Films of Bette Davis* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 2nd edn, 1973), pp. 7–8.
- 36 Henry Hart gives no indication of what he actually means by the phrase 'some knowing men of my acquaintance'. It could well be an innocent remark which implies nothing more than a discerning minority of male viewers acquainted with the critic (possibly fellow critics). At the time of publication, however, this remark could be more knowing than this, and refer covertly to the growing band of gay male fans who had begun to worship Bette Davis, making their presence known at public screenings of her films and at her stage appearances. See Lawrence J. Quirk, 'The Cult of Bette and Joan: The True Reasons Why They Drive Homosexuals Wild', *Quirk's Reviews*, no. 9, March 1973, pp. 1–5, and Lawrence J. Quirk, *Fasten Your Seatbelts: The Passionate Life of Bette Davis* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1990), pp. 411–12.
- 37 Leaming, *Bette Davis: A Biography*, p. 191.
- 38 Quirk, 'The Cult of Bette and Joan', pp. 1–5. Quirk (nephew of James R. Quirk, editor and publisher of *Photoplay* in the 1920s and 1930s) was the editor and chief reviewer of his own independent film journal in New York City.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 40 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 Quirk wrote that 'it should be noted that like all true artists, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford strike universal chords, and can evoke positive and cathartic responses from all kinds of people – women, old folks, sensitive adolescents, thoughtful cineastes, film scholars who admire the more intelligent and depthful and tasteful aspects of their work. Here, of course, lie the bulk of their admirers and they are mostly heterosexual in orientation'. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

- 47 Ibid., p. 95.
- 48 Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harpers & Row, 1981), p. 94.
- 49 Ibid., p. 101.
- 50 Ken Geist, *Pictures Will Talk* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1978), p. 167, n. 20.
- 51 For example, Keith Howes, in his encyclopaedia of homosexuality on film, radio and television, *Broadcasting It* (1993), establishes the inherent homosexuality of Eve and de Witt, writing that 'Eve Harrington, with her ambiguous clothes, hairstyle and body language, has an uneasy intimacy with the acerbic theatre critic and we witness a seduction of a young fan at her apartment' (p. 21). He describes George Sanders's heterosexual smoke-screen tactic of being seen with 'a starlet (Marilyn MONROE) on his arm' making him appear to be a 'womanizer', but that his dressing-room scene with Eve reveals that they share the same unspeakable sexuality. Keith Howes, *Broadcasting It: An Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality on Film, Radio and Television in the UK 1923-63* (London and New York: Cassell, 1993), p. 21.
- 52 *Remembrance* (Jerry Tartaglia, 1990), a five-minute short film mixing repeated scenes from *All About Eve* with home movies, in order to explore the director's life-long fascination with Bette Davis and her films.
- 53 *All About Steve* (Chi Chi La Rue, 1993). This gay pornographic video features a pastiche of the opening scene which replaces the original Sarah Siddons award ceremony with the Gay Video Awards. In this version Margo becomes Marco (Derek Cruise), ageing gay porn star, and Eve becomes Steve Carrington (Mark West), an aspiring porn star who sleeps his way to the top, his rise chronicled in intimate detail.
- 54 *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1999). This movie includes scenes from *All About Eve* being watched on Spanish television (dubbed into Spanish) by a young man (gay by implication of the fact that he reads Truman Capote and is fascinated by an ageing actress performing the role of Blanche in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*) and his mother. The film also includes a number of scenes which closely resemble moments from *All About Eve*.
- 55 In the process, of course, the significance of the film's ambivalent engagement with the 'woman problem' issue has once more been obscured.
- 56 Mead, *Male and Female*, p. 300.

4

The Fall and Rise of *Fantasia*

Amy M. Davis

Some films are received by audiences in a positive way, and immediately become critical and/or commercial successes. Others are disregarded by both audiences and critics and survive only as footnotes in cinema reference books and on late-night television. A third type of film is poorly received when it first appears, but becomes a success with later audiences. This chapter analyses the circumstances surrounding the 'fall and rise' of one such film: Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, first released in 1940. It examines the reasons for the film's initial commercial failure, and the manner in which its popular reception changed over time.

The makers of *Fantasia* saw it as a new kind of animated film, as did some enthusiastic film critics. Otis Ferguson, for instance, declared *Fantasia* to be 'strange and beautiful ... the only excuse I have ever seen for having eyes and ears at the same time,' while Peyton Boswell, editor of *Art Digest*, called it 'an aesthetic experience never to be forgotten.'² The movie-going public, however, appeared considerably less enthusiastic and the film initially failed at the box office. This disappointing début was followed by a slow climb towards profitability and public esteem over the next three decades. By the time of its fiftieth anniversary rerelease in 1990, *Fantasia* had proved sufficiently durable to be included on the list of the top 200 highest-grossing films ever made. Released on video in 1991, it rapidly became the largest-selling video marketed to that date.

In 1934, Walt Disney Studios had begun work on its first animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. As production costs soared to what was then a shocking \$2 million, movie industry insiders, doubting that Disney could ever make back his production costs on such an expensive 'cartoon', dubbed *Snow White* 'Disney's Folly'. In 1937, however, it was released to great critical acclaim and staggering popular success, making over \$8 million at the box office in 1937-8 and saving the studio from bankruptcy.³ This success gave Disney the confidence to expand the studio, and although he rapidly abandoned his original goal of releasing an animated feature every year, he invested heavily in researching and developing new technologies for the medium, and in educating his artists through classes taught by artists from the Chouinard Art Institute.⁴ Throughout his career, in an effort to 'expand the boundaries of animation' (to paraphrase his own often-expressed ambition), Disney repeatedly put his studio in debt, gambling on both his own reputation as an entertainer and on what he saw as the ability of cinema audiences to recognise and appreciate well-produced animated films. Such risks had turned out to be great successes in terms of both Disney's own reputation as an innovative film-maker and his studio's finances. Thus, when *Fantasia* premiered at the Broadway Theatre in New York City on 13 November 1940, the fact that