

Teresa de Lauretis's resistance to the request for assistance in imagining an agenda for *Critical Inquiry* in the twenty-first century seems exactly right to me both in its refusal to engage in what she characterizes as a form of commodity speculation and also because of her insistence that "the time for theory is always now." Speculating about the future can be a useful enterprise, but it seems to me that the primary reason *Critical Inquiry* has enjoyed a very long and unusually successful run has been the special gifts and sensitivities of its chief editors (we have had only two in nearly thirty years of publication), its executive editor (to my delight, this remains a class of one) and, too, of its coeditors (at present numbering seven). Managing *Critical Inquiry* requires an editor to keep both feet planted firmly on the ground of the present, with one eye focused sharply on the open transom—the skylight that has traditionally served as our window on the future. It also requires a willingness to take risks, and in this regard Tom Mitchell has repeatedly shown remarkable shrewdness combined with something akin to valor—most especially at those often hilarious editorial meetings in which he casts the sole vote favoring the publication of work he finds promising, challenging, useful, a step into the future he wants to make happen.

The practice of editing *Critical Inquiry*, then, has been one that has carefully avoided setting agendas or making predictions about the future. We might wish to imagine the shape of things to come (for example, the configurations of theory and critical practice in 2033), but our own critical practices tell us that we can't and with good reason—theory and practice stand to each other in reciprocal relation; each assumes and responds to the other. Absent the motivation of having to come to terms with changes taking place on the ground (or of projecting effective means for bringing off such change), there is little point to theorizing and few, if any, dividends. Some years ago, a member of the faculty here informed me that he read theory *all the time* and felt obliged to change his own theoretical commitments on the average of once a week. Predictably, these shifting foundations have had no perceptible effect on his work, which constitutes a seamless body of publications.

The history of *Critical Inquiry's* mutability is itself the best reason for refusing to read the entrails of any given goat. It came into being nearly thirty years ago as a journal of criticism, founded by three members of the university's Department of English Literature and Language. (Commitments to genetic explanations being what they are, there remain a few members of the faculty at the University of Chicago who insist that the journal is an organ of the English department. One more victory for the reflex arc.) The distinction of the new journal was to be its commitment to second-generation formalist criticism as practiced in English and diverse disciplines in the humanities.

The first editor of *Critical Inquiry*, Shelly Sacks, initiated the journal in September 1974 with a description of the goals guiding the selection of the essays appearing in volume 1, number 1. Speaking not only as *the* editor, but also as one of the three founders of the journal (along with Arthur Heiserman and Wayne Booth), Sacks wrote:

We sought critics who value examination of the assumptions underlying particular discriminations about works of art and insist upon the highest standards of evidence relevant to conclusions drawn in practical criticism. We were interested in criticism that aspires to be a special kind of "learning"—not in any sense dispassionate or impersonal but something akin to that fusion of human commitment with objectivity that Michael Polanyi characterizes as "personal knowledge." In short, the critics we wished to publish were those who formulate fruitful and exciting questions

about works of art and who attempt to find the best possible answers to those questions, no matter where their explorations lead them.

It was clear to us from the outset then that the journal should not derive its unity from the limits of any single subject but rather—though we eschewed terms like “interdisciplinary” or “comparative”—from an editorial policy that insists on the widest diversity of subject made generally interesting to advocates of disciplined criticism by our authors’ concern for theory, method, and the exploration of critical principals.¹

The editorial goals and standards invoked by Sacks depended upon suppositions that were, within the matter of a few years, to be challenged, chewed up, transformed, or dispatched in the pages of the journal itself—for example, notions of the formal unity of individual works of art and the relation of form to the goals of critical explanation, as well as the specificity of artistic media and the autonomy of artistic practices and the principles of scholarly disciplines. The journal was to break new ground by insisting on displays of methodological self-consciousness and by placing the work of literary critics back-to-back with the work of music critics, art historians, philosophers, and representatives of other humanistic disciplines, including, most daringly, historians of popular culture and critics of film (with an occasional contribution by *real* artists). Some academics viewed the journal as an experiment in mongrelization and popularization—a sign of the impending deprofessionalization of the disciplines. Viewed from deep within the discipline of art history, publishing in *Critical Inquiry* was taken to be the sign of a special kind of authorial failure—no standards/the wrong kind of intellectual companions. I published my first academic essay in volume 2, number 1 of the journal.

I take Sacks’s 1974 editorial statement to have been intended as both a description and a prediction, but while it was an excellent description, it failed (I want to say it failed necessarily) as a predictive instrument. From the ground of the launchpad editorial of September 1974, it would have been impossible to predict the character of the journal in September 1984. Yet, within less than ten years, *Critical Inquiry* became something entirely different from what its founding editors had meant it to be—it became the indispensable journal of theory and criticism, assisting in every one of its numbers in the recasting of the very terms *theory* and *criticism*. This transformation was entirely dependent upon the ability of the editors of *Critical Inquiry* to be engaged in the present, while reading for the future. That ability, if we maintain the energy to use it, will determine the various shapes of *Critical Inquiry* in the twenty-first century.

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1. Sheldon Sacks, “A Chimera for Breakfast,” *Critical Inquiry* 1 (Sept. 1974): 1.