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“STOP WHINING AND GET ON WITH THE BASIC BUSINESS OF BEING BRITISH”: Notes on Robin Wood, Canada and the Concept of a National Film Culture

Résumé: Après avoir émigré de l'Angleterre au Canada à la fin des années 1970, Robin Wood est devenu un critique « canadien » majeur. On lui a cependant reproché son manque d'enthousiasme pour le cinéma canadien. Son attitude face au cinéma canadien résultait en partie de l'influence du critique littéraire anglais F.R. Lewis. Mais elle découlait aussi des tendances intellectuelles et des préférences culturelles que Wood partageait avec d'autres jeunes chroniqueurs qui, comme lui, avaient contribué à la revue londonienne *Movie* au cours des années 1960 et 70. Wood a appliqué à la culture cinématographique canadienne la critique du cinéma national britannique et l'admiration pour le cinéma hollywoodien qui caractérisaient *Movie*.

In the autumn of 1977 British film critic Robin Wood began teaching at York University in Toronto. While not giving up his British citizenship, Wood became an expatriate and, in a sense, a Canadian. The move obviously had consequences for Wood's work, as the British and European situation Wood had addressed earlier was replaced by contemporary Canadian and North American issues.¹ Wood increased his ties to his adopted country by helping to organise a highly influential retrospective on the horror film at the 1979 Toronto International Film Festival—or the Festival of Festivals as it was called then. In the same year he delivered the Martin Walsh Memorial Lecture at the annual meeting of the Film Studies Association of Canada. He also began to take part in demonstrations against film censorship in Ontario and to write for publications like *Body Politic* and *The Toronto Clarion*. Soon, Wood became a regular columnist for the monthly journal *Canadian Forum* and joined a collective that by mid-decade commenced publication of *CineAction*, the Toronto-based magazine in which the bulk of his writings subsequently appeared. Thus, a foreign film critic who, according to David Bordwell, by the early seventies had become “the most

influential explicatory critic in English” and whom Peter Harcourt called “one of the most prolific film critics writing in English,” became part of an English-speaking, Canadian film culture.²

Rather soon, however, it became clear that Wood’s incorporation into this new setting would not come about without friction. Although the critic on different occasions attested to a commitment to Canadian film and even stated that he regarded himself as Canadian, his writings only intermittently testified to these alleged allegiances in a conventional way.³ A case in point: in his seminal 1979 assessment of the horror film, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” Wood relegated Canadian *auteur* David Cronenberg to the most dispensable category among those invented for the genre’s practitioners. As a result, Cronenberg was placed in what the recently converted Marxist critic tagged “The Reactionary Wing.”⁴ Similarly, his comments during the mid-80s debate about Canadian film culture were generally perceived as rather superfluous and unhelpful to the cause.⁵

In fact, as late as the year 2000, in some published afterthoughts on the Toronto Film Festival, Wood’s lament concerning Canadian film appears symptomatic of a certain frustration that has marked the critic’s attempts to come to terms with the cinema of his adopted country. After encountering a handful of new Canadian films at the event, Wood concluded, “There seems no good reason why Canada should not have as active, vibrant and flourishing a film industry as Taiwan or Iran, yet where are our Hous [Hsiao Hsien] [Edward] Yangs, our [Abbas] Kiarostamis and our [Mohsen and Samira] Makhmalbafs?” Wood went on to observe, “The great majority of Canadian films seems to suffer from an inferiority complex—with low self-esteem we all fall down.”⁶ In a later article, Wood identified what he saw as a condescending attitude toward Canadian films permeating in subtle ways the more popular side of film culture. Moreover, he did not exempt himself from sometimes expressing views along the same line.⁷

Hence, in spite of Wood’s increasingly leftist views and his escalating hostility towards the United States and contemporary Hollywood cinema, his writings during his later career in Canada have rarely lent themselves to a struggle on behalf of a strong, independent Canadian film culture, or what Andrew Higson has described as “cultural (and economic) resistance; a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood’s international domination.”⁸

Wood’s stance toward the Canadian cinematic cause has not endeared him to his “fellow” Canadians who support a strong Canadian national identity that could counter American cultural imperialism. Peter Harcourt, for example, drew attention to Wood’s British background and his education at Cambridge University while describing Wood’s outlook in what may be regarded as post-colonial terms. In Harcourt’s view, Wood displayed a particularly English version of “the insensitivity of imperialist condescension... [which] can never be expected adequately to see the value of colonial cultures.”⁹

Although Harcourt’s view is not necessarily off the mark, there are other

circumstances to be considered in relation to this issue. In fact, examining certain aspects of Wood's background and his relationship to the concept of national film culture illuminates some distinctive developments within various national cultures and some choices made not only by Wood but also by many critics and scholars within the field of film studies as a whole.

In "The Concept of National Cinema," Higson identifies a "criticism-led approach to national cinema," involving a wish "to reduce national cinema to the terms of a quality art cinema, a culturally worthy cinema steeped in the high-cultural and/or modernist heritage of a particular nation-state."¹⁰ Furthermore, according to Higson, this strategy has been used prescriptively rather than descriptively, emphasizing what ought to be the unique coherence, meaning and identity of a national cinema. In short, it is an approach involving a hegemonizing and mythologizing process with nationalist overtones.¹¹

Higson's observations are relevant to discussions of Canadian cinema, particularly when one ponders the debate instigated by Bruce Elder's article "The Cinema We Need," originally published in *Canadian Forum* in 1985.¹² Symptomatic of a "criticism-led approach to national cinema," Elder's starting point is the notion that a national cultural crisis prevailed, resulting, among other things, in an uncertainty about the nature of an essentially English-Canadian cinema. Elder's approach privileged an alternative or experimental film practice as a way of developing an English-Canadian cinema distinct from the traditional (Hollywood) fare. His intervention in the national cinema debate prompted responses from, to name but a few, Peter Harcourt, Piers Handling, Bart Testa, and Michael Dorland. Elder extended his argument in his book *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture*, as he pondered the question of what constitutes "Canadianness" and "Canadian sensibility."¹³

Since then, of course, a large number of critics and scholars have written about the particular nature of Canadian film, its genres and masterworks, and what forms and subjects are its forte. That critical discourse has been marked by, in Angela Stukator's words, "a desire to assert and affirm Canadian cultural identity, and in so doing...contribute to the surge of nationalism in the face of globalization."¹⁴ Inevitably, Robin Wood participated in the debate. First, he responded to Elder's article in the same journal that published "The Cinema We Need." Wood expressed scepticism about Elder's preferred cinematic form, which he described as, "non-narrative, experimental, concerned with 'perceptions' but not 'ideas,' a cinema of 'immediacy' and 'multiplicity.'" At the same time, he admitted that, "perhaps partly because I am not a native Canadian this project [of linking Canadian cinema to a Canadian national identity] has always seemed to me of limited interest."¹⁵

Several years later, in a two-part essay in *CineAction*, "Towards a Canadian (Inter-)national Cinema," the critic addressed such matters as national culture, American cultural imperialism and Canadian national identity.¹⁶ In that context,

he enthusiastically celebrated two domestic films, *Loyalties* (Canada, 1986, Anne Wheeler) and *Life Classes* (Canada, 1987, William MacGillivray). However, when he took up the question of a Canadian national film culture and what he implied was a widely and enthusiastically greeted "Great Canadian Film Renaissance," his attitude was markedly pessimistic: "The search for a 'Canadian identity' clearly distinguishable from the overwhelmingly potent national identity of the United States seems to me doomed to failure from the outset." Moreover, he continued, "the excitement over this 'renaissance' now looks absurdly premature."¹⁷ One can hardly disagree with Bart Testa's conclusion: "Wood does not believe in the project of Canadian cultural nationalism, at least not in the forms that project now takes."¹⁸

Rather than simply dismissing Wood's position as single-mindedly opposed to the entire venture of establishing a Canadian national cinema, one must recognize certain individual and historical circumstances, including developments in film studies generally, that make the matter somewhat more complicated than it might seem.

1. *Cultural Self-laceration.* Wood started out as a critic when animated discussions about a national cinema in Britain included celebrations of "kitchen-sink realism" and speculations that the work of new directors like Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz might constitute a British equivalent of the French New Wave.¹⁹ At the same time, however, the national film culture was dominated by what Charles Barr has labelled "The Film Appreciation Kit,"²⁰ which accepted (in Colin MacCabe's words) "that cultural authority which linked the classics to the national tradition."²¹ On that view, for example, John Grierson and the documentary movement was "good," as were Hitchcock's early British films, in contrast to his later, American ones. As Geoff Brown sarcastically remarked, "It was far better to stare soberly at fishermen's nets or bren guns than to gaze in delight at Betty Grable."²²

To the young film critics, including Wood, who appeared in the pages of the new periodical *Movie* and who had contributed to the university magazine *Oxford Opinion*, this "kit" appears to have been an important incentive to write about film. For under the kit's surface the upstarts perceived jingoism, condescension towards Hollywood film, and a lack of enthusiasm towards cinema generally. Consequently, they launched a critique of the national cinema together with support of Hollywood cinema.

"[T]he British cinema is as dead as before. Perhaps it was never alive," wrote Wood's long-time friend V.F. Perkins in the first issue of *Movie*.²³ Nevertheless, behind this confrontational posture, an interest in British film was discernable. Perkins proposed that certain films made in Britain at least represented a sort of hope for the future. As an example, Perkins cited the "horror-cum-mystery picture with unaesthetic contents," *Taste of Fear* (UK, 1961, Seth Holt), produced by the notorious Hammer company.²⁴

Wood routinely disparaged or ignored British film during the 1960s,²⁵ and in his first book, *Hitchcock's Films*, he contradicted “the film appreciation kit” by endorsing the view that the British period of the director’s career was mere “prentice work.”²⁶ Yet, at the end of the decade, in an article prompted by the death of low-budget horror film director Michael Reeves, Wood describes Reeves as “the director who perhaps came nearest to fulfilling the wishes of *Movie* for a revival in the British cinema—a director working at the heart of the commercial industry, making *genre* movies without apparent friction or frustration.” He concludes the piece by asserting, “Reeves’s death is a tragic loss for the British cinema,” and adds that the films exemplified what could be done “within that most discouraging of areas—the British commercial cinema.”²⁷

For the most part however, Wood’s viewpoint is similar to the one Perkins had presented almost a decade earlier, with Hollywood (and European art films) admired at the expense of domestic film production. Unlike a more recent generation of British film scholars and critics, Wood did not regard the predominance of Hollywood on British screens as troubling evidence of American cultural imperialism, and his assumption that real achievement was not to be found in British cinema reflects the “cultural self-laceration” that Barr identified as a long-standing norm in British critical discourse—a discourse that, since the 1960s, has been supplanted by a serious theoretical investigation of the national film culture.²⁸ One recognizes, as well, a wish (similar to that of many contributors to *Cahiers du cinéma*) to experience foreign cultures, not least American culture, by way of their cinema—again, to the detriment of one’s own country’s cinema.²⁹ Recalling the critical agenda that Wood brought with him to Canada helps to explain his reluctance to become an advocate of the cinema of his adopted homeland.

2. *Anti-modernism*. Closely connected to that agenda was the notion, noted by Colin MacCabe, that cinema provided a “respite from...modernism.”³⁰ In his early books on Hitchcock, Arthur Penn and Howard Hawks, Wood expressed doubts about the merits of the canonized tradition of modernism within the arts. James Joyce, Jackson Pollock, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs and occasionally Jean-Luc Godard, were sometimes bundled together under the heading “revolutionary” art—a pejorative term in this case, suggesting the general decadence of the contemporary cultural situation.³¹

By contrast, Wood sometimes portrayed Hollywood as a last resort for “traditional” or “communal” art. Paradoxical as it may sound, and although the critic has always championed European art film and what became known as “world cinema,” Wood has also, to some extent, been part of what Paul Schrader once described as “the backlash against European art films in favour of the American cinema.”³² As late as 2003, Wood wrote,

My central predilection has always been Hollywood, though essentially the classical period (roughly 1930-1960, from the coming of sound to the dominance of television and the beginning of the takeover by corporations). It's a question of which you value more highly, communal art or personal art. All the richest periods of artistic achievement—Renaissance Italy, the Elizabethan drama, the Vienna of Haydn and Mozart—have been instances of communality: the availability of established genres, the constant interaction among artists, the sense of *belonging* to the culture, of being supported by it, of speaking to and for a wide audience that cuts across all divisions of class and gender. Compare the isolation of the modern artist, the emphasis on self-expression, “originality,” novelty, the audience dwindled to a small elite. But art that is mere “self-expression” tends to become increasingly impoverished and uninteresting.³³

Accordingly, and even if Wood in the same work deplores contemporary Hollywood as, “above all a cinema of distraction, of unreality, designed not to encourage thinking but to dull it into extinction,” its “communal” form of existence, of production and of formal “conformity” seem to have remained appealing.³⁴ Furthermore, Wood's opposition of “communal” and “personal” art seems analogous to the opposition between Hollywood and “national cinema,” as conceptualized by Higson.³⁵

Writing on Atom Egoyan in *CineAction*, Wood applied this dichotomy to Canadian film culture. While expressing respect for Egoyan, Wood placed him in a tradition he distrusted. This tradition, as Wood saw it, was “the cinema of personal confession/obsession effectively established in the late '50s/early '60s by the advent on the international scene of Bergman and Fellini.” Then, comparing Egoyan to Québécois filmmaker Jean-Claude Lauzon, then fresh from his debut feature, Wood declared,

Much as I detest *Un Zoo, la Nuit* [Canada, 1987, Jean-Claude Lauzon], and much as I am drawn to Egoyan's work, Lauzon's readiness to work within established conventions might hold, in the long run, the promise of greater staying power, greater adaptability, and the greater potential range that comes with a confident but unintimidated and uninhibited acceptance of tradition and collaboration.³⁶

One may claim Wood has been proven wrong by the subsequent careers of Egoyan and Lauzon; nevertheless, what is interesting here is the critic's application to Canadian film of a distinction between popular Hollywood and art cinema that he had applied to British cinema in the 1960s. Certainly this lack of sympathy for the direction most national cinemas have taken helps to explain his response to Canadian film.

3. *Grappling with the National*. That Wood was educated at Cambridge University and that he has expressed a life-long admiration for the legendary British literary critic F.R. Leavis is well known. In the mid-1970s Wood stated, "Leavis is a great critic, and a great man: although a critic, one of the great *creative* minds of the century."³⁷ Furthermore, Wood has repeatedly expressed a personal identification with a particular British cultural background he shared with Leavis. After more than a decade of permanent residence in Canada, Wood admitted, "I am very British, with deep roots in a peculiarly British tradition.... The British tradition to which I refer (both creative and critical) might be represented by such figures as William Blake, George Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, F.R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams."³⁸ Bernard Bergonzi has described this tradition as based on an essentially religious or metaphysical belief in the power of literature and a permeating "nationalistic" element.³⁹

Wood's continued advocacy of a Leavisite and specifically English intellectual tradition and his insistence on his own place in it, coupled with his seeming indifference to Canadian intellectual life, literature, and film, may be seen as an indication of his ongoing alignment with what Peter Harcourt called, in a formulation cited earlier, "imperialist cultures." At the same time, it must be noted that Wood has claimed, "I feel no commitment to preserving and developing a specifically British culture," while insisting that, "My 'country' is Marxism, feminism, gay liberation...the major progressive movements of our age, which are necessarily international and transcultural."⁴⁰

4. *Idiosyncrasy*. Despite his preference for classical Hollywood films, Wood has on occasion been an ambassador for Canadian film, as indicated by articles from the late 1980s, in which he praised, for example, *Loyalties* and *Life Classes*. In a survey conducted by *Sight and Sound* in 1992, he even named the latter as one of the ten best films ever made. He has also expressed admiration for several Canadian works about the obstacles faced by contemporary adolescents—e.g., *Rollercoaster* (Canada, 1999, Scott Smith) and *Kitchen Party* (Canada, 1997, Gary Burns).⁴¹ Ironically, Wood has been accused of preferring Canadian films "which few have heard of, fewer have seen, and most have little chance of seeing."⁴² It is true that most of the Canadian films Wood has shown an interest in received, at best, a marginal reception—as Wood himself has recognized.⁴³

In short, in his occasional appraisals of Canadian film, the critic has gone against the grain: his repeatedly expressed reservations regarding what other commentators have largely agreed on as works of distinction or as periods of renaissance for Canadian cinema have established Wood as someone who, seemingly on principle, defies received opinion in the field of Canadian film culture. Certainly, Wood's writing on Canadian film has not been valued by commentators who see cinema as a potential contribution to a strong, independent Canadian cultural identity and as a means of resisting Hollywood's international

domination. Hence Peter Harcourt's characterization (or caricature) of Wood's outlook: "stop whining and get on with the basic business of being British."⁴⁴

However, given the cultural context in which Wood began as a film critic, as well as subsequent developments in film criticism and scholarship, Wood's position as a "Canadian" film critic seems less cranky and idiosyncratic—and even less "British" than his detractors have claimed. The British film culture in which Wood first established himself resisted extolling the domestic film output. Moreover, the examples of modernist or art cinema that were regarded as expressions of a national cinema—Ingmar Bergman's films in Sweden, the French New Wave, the New German Cinema, and so forth—have not necessarily retained the place within the canon that they once enjoyed. Given these developments, Wood's scepticism regarding canonized Canadian cinema does not seem so against the grain after all.

NOTES

1. To take just one obvious instance, Wood's seminal work on the horror film towards the end of the 1970s would probably have been impossible had he stayed in the UK, since many films Wood considered were, because of British censorship, not allowed to be shown there.
2. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 100. Peter Harcourt, *A Canadian Journey: Conversations with Time* (Toronto: Oberon Press, 1994), 82, 83.
3. In Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 24, the critic writes, "I regard myself today as Canadian."
4. Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, Richard Lippe and Robin Wood, eds. (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 23-28.
5. The debate was instigated by Bruce Elder in "The Cinema We Need" in *Canadian Forum* in 1985. For Elder's, as well as some other contributions to the ensuing debate, see *Documents in Canadian Film*, Douglas Fetherling, ed. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1988), 260-336. Significantly, Wood's intervention is not included, although several of the contributors comment upon it. For Wood's comments, see Robin Wood, "Whose Cinema?" *Canadian Forum* 65.749 (May 1985): 37-38.
6. Robin Wood, "Some Arbitrary Forays into The Toronto Film Festival," *CineAction* 53 (2000): 58. The two films Wood has in mind are *Low Self-Esteem Girl* (Canada, 2000, Blaine Thurier) and *We All Fall Down* (Canada, 2000, Martin Cummins).
7. Robin Wood, "The Party's Over: Rollercoaster," *CineAction* 57 (2002): 30-31.
8. Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," in *Film and Nationalism*, Alan Williams ed., (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 54.
9. Peter Harcourt, "Harcourt to Wood," *CineAction* 17 (1989): 21. For a somewhat similar viewpoint, see José Arroyo, "Bordwell Considered: Cognitivism, Colonialism and Canadian Cinematic Culture," *CineAction* 28 (1992): 84-87.
10. Higson, 53.
11. *Ibid.*, 54.
12. Elder, "The Cinema We Need," in *Documents in Canadian Film*, 260-271.
13. Bruce Elder, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989), xiii, xv.
14. Angela Stukator, Review of *Guide to the Cinema(s) of Canada, Take One's Essential*

Guide to Canadian Film, Weird Sex & Snowshoes and Other Canadian Film Phenomena, Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques 11.2 (2002): 102.

15. Wood, "Whose Cinema?," 37.
16. Robin Wood, "Towards a Canadian (Inter-)national Cinema (Part 1)," *CineAction* 16 (1989): 59-63, and "Towards a Canadian (Inter-)national Cinema (Part 2)," *CineAction* 17 (1989): 23- 35.
17. Wood, "Towards a Canadian (Inter-)national Cinema (Part 1)," 59, 60.
18. Bart Testa, "So, What Did Elder Say?," in *Documents in Canadian Film*, 273.
19. Cf. David Robinson, "Look Back in Anger," *Sight and Sound* 3-4 (Summer-Autumn 1959): 122-23, 179, and Peter John Dyer, "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning," *Sight and Sound* 1 (Winter 1961): 35.
20. Charles Barr, "Letter from Charles Barr," *The Velvet Light Trap* 21 (Summer 1985): 5-6.
21. Colin McCabe, *The Eloquence of the Vulgar: Language, Cinema and the Politics of Culture* (London: BFI, 1999), 152.
22. Geoff Brown, "Paradise Found and Lost: The Course of British Realism," in *The British Cinema Book*, Robert Murphy ed., (London: BFI, 1997), 188.
23. V. F. Perkins (on behalf of the editorial board), "The British Cinema," *Movie* 1 (June 1962): 3.
24. *Ibid.*, 7.
25. See, for example, Robin Wood, "Godard & Weekend," *Movie* 16 (1968-69): 29.
26. Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, 73.
27. Robin Wood, "In Memoriam Michael Reeves," *Movie* 17 (1969-70): 2, 6.
28. Charles Barr, "Introduction: Amnesia and Schizophrenia," in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, Charles Barr, ed. (London: BFI, 1986), 4.
29. In *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (231), Wood talks about the Britain in which he grew up in terms that however implicit, clearly suggest something along this line. For a similar description of the British "scene," see Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xiv.
30. McCabe, 152.
31. Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks* (London: Secker and Warburg and BFI, 1968), 8.
32. Paul Schrader, "Paul Schrader's Guilty Pleasures," *Film Comment* 1 (Jan-Feb, 1979): 62.
33. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 309-310.
34. *Ibid.*, xxx.
35. For example, the films Peter Harcourt suggested for a revised Canadian canon of the 1960s and '70s seem likely to satisfy Higson's definition, cited earlier. See Peter Harcourt, "Roads Not Taken, Avenues Not Explored: Confessions of an Unconscious Canonizer," *Take One* 8 (1995): 20-26. Elder emphasizes avant-garde and modernist traditions as the basis of "truly" Canadian film. (Elder, *Image and Identity*, xv, 30.)
36. Wood, "Towards a Canadian (Inter-)national Cinema" (Part 1), 63.
37. Robin Wood, *Personal Views: Explorations in Film* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976), 70.
38. Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, 7.
39. Bernard Bergonzi, *Exploding English* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 30.
40. Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, 40.
41. Wood, "The Party's Over," 30-34.
42. The quote is attributed to former *CineAction* collective member Janine Marchessault. (Quoted in Wood, "Towards a Canadian (Inter-)national Cinema" [Part 2]: 23.)