

A TRIBUTE TO

Robin Wood

Robin Wood has been with *CineAction* since the beginning—a crucial part of the founding editorial collective in 1985. Robin has retired as one of our editors but will continue as a regular contributor. As a tribute to Robin and his contributions to *CineAction* and to the study of film, we have collected the presentations at a panel which honoured him last year. The Film Studies Association of Canada held its annual conference at York University in Toronto in May, 2006. The Association hosted a tribute to Robin, who is professor emeritus at York where he began teaching film studies in 1977 and still teaches in the Graduate Program in Film. The panel was titled “The Anxiety of Influence—Robin Wood and Critical Film Studies.” The session was the most popular of the conference, with over 100 in attendance.

KASS BANNING

The idea for planning a festschrift for Robin grew out of a conversation between former and current members of the *CineAction* editorial collective, congregated to celebrate twenty years of *CineAction* last Christmas. We deemed it was shocking that such a tribute, as of yet, had not been conferred. It was indeed the time. When alerted to the festschrift in-the-making, Robin’s rejoinder, playing at miscomprehension, was “Do I need a fresh shirt?”

The panel of short responses assembled here chart the “Wood effect,” the distinctive and diverse ways in which Robin’s contribution to the field of film criticism has touched them. They speak to “the anxiety of influence,” often cross-hatching the personal and professional world we inhabit.

“Touch” is a key term here. For what under-girds Robin’s outstanding prolific productivity, his extensive critical project, and I will leave the panelists to further more minute embellishment, is his enduring commitment to humanism. Robin’s oft-mentioned debt to the work of F. R. Leavis, with its insistence on the primacy of the text and the moral imperative, I believe helped him to vigorously resist passing fashions in film analysis, be it linguistic turns or otherwise. At the same time Robin’s criticism grew with the field of film studies, fashioning

select emerging models such as sexual politics or ideological critique to his own discerning regard for the film text. He stayed the humanist course, paradigm wars notwithstanding. This consistency, coupled with a steadfast regard for form, nuance and textual detail and disregard for lobbing totalizing theory onto a film, never resulted in reductive readings of films, fostering instead an eye for both “structures of feeling,” and to use one of his favourite terms, the subversive.

VARDA BURSTYN

I was deeply honoured to be asked to participate in this panel of tribute to Robin Wood.

I am very sorry not to be able to deliver my accolades and my thanks to Robin in person because Robin is a special person -- a hugely special and important human being -- and I want to be there with all of you to celebrate him. I am only sorry that my own chronic health problems have prevented me, at the last minute, from coming. ...

I met Robin Wood in 1978, if memory serves, while I was paving a chequered path at York, and feeling—despite all the political science and sociology and humanities classes that

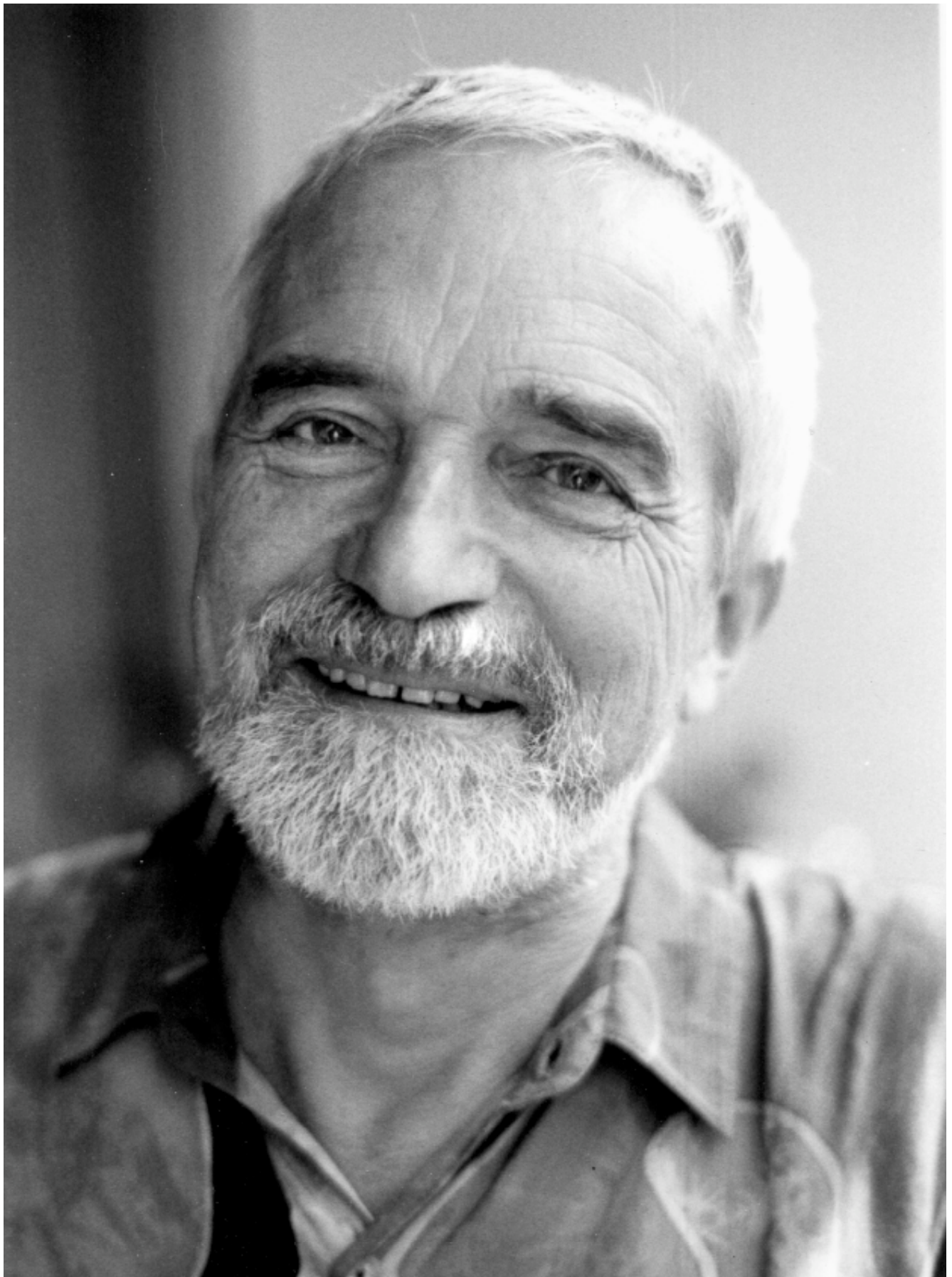


Photo by Harry Oldmeadow

should have been great but weren't—like a fish out of water, I had signed up for a course on film and feminism more as pleasure, a break from all the dutiful analysis of the other courses. But I had no idea what to expect.

What I got—and it was a gift from the goddess—was the amazing, the brilliant, the funny, the incredibly handsome Robin Wood. From the first five minutes of the first class I was totally hooked, and I moved heaven and earth to make sure I attended every one of his classes faithfully—I was not a faithful attendee, I confess, at my others.

Robin's lectures—and beyond that his knowledge, his presence, his attitude to students, that was at once encouraging and demanding of a higher standard of thought and intelligence—were a heady tonic. And, lucky, lucky me, he seemed to value my contribution too. Indeed he valued it enough to befriend me and to encourage me to write about my thoughts on film. And then encouraged me to publish those thoughts.

I had certainly written things before—articles for Marxist newspapers, essays, the usual things—but those had seemed like duties, prose to be churned out, full of admonition and analysis but lacking altogether in joy. Suddenly, writing for Robin, my fingers were flying on the keyboard, ideas were tumbling out like miracles, and I thought “holy cow, this is what writing is supposed to be like, this is great, maybe I'll even be a writer!”

In other words, the pleasure of my mind's engagement with the ideas, the approaches and the personality that Robin brought to the study of film animated my whole being. Truly. And it is no exaggeration to say now that I can look back on almost thirty years—yikes!—and say that his support, encouragement and brilliance had everything to do with the path I chose out of York and into the world as a writer. So this is my “Life Debt” to Robin, and it is huge.

Unlike many of the people here who were once students of Robin or who remain his colleagues today, I passed relatively briefly through film studies, briefly and happily. And so it falls more appropriately to them to take the measure of this extraordinary and enormous legacy in that field.

But I can speak of his legacy beyond it, and it is no mean one. I am sure that every serious student he ever had learned a great deal from Robin—my God, I certainly did. In my book on politics and the culture of sport, I acknowledged my enormous “intellectual debt” to Robin. Here I'd like to conclude by doing it again, more emphatically than ever. For Robin not only helped me to affirm my own understanding of the importance of culture. He extended it and deepened it and helped me approach it with, what I believe, is the right critical approach to take to all cultural phenomena. Here I am speaking of the need to be faithful to the “text” itself—be it one film or a whole body of films, one hockey game or a whole culture of sport, one hyped advertisement about some new technology or a whole, suicidal technophilic culture, which is what I have been writing about now for some years.

I, like so many others, was enamoured of a number of theories to analyze culture. Robin was certainly familiar with these and drew on them when useful. But in fact, it was his insistence on fidelity to what is there—not to a pre-conceived idea of what should be there or what would be there or what could be there,

but to what is—that has served me so very, very well in making my way through the whole wild creation of humanity on this crazy planet Earth.

Susan Ditta, first curator of film and video at the National Gallery in Ottawa and the Film and Video Officer at the Canada Council for five years after her tenure at the Gallery, is now a distinguished free-lance curator. She is a very old friend, lives around the corner from me here in Peterborough, and she expressed delight that this event is taking place. “Tell Robin for me,” she said, “that he is one of my heroes, my real heroes, and I think we all owe him a huge debt of thanks, of learning, of accomplishment. Tell him that and give him a big hug.” So Robin, I've asked Kass to deliver a hug from me, and now to add one from Sue. You are the cat's pyjamas, the bee's knees, the very greatest, and we are so much the better and richer for having learned from you and received your blessings.

SCOTT FORSYTH

I have been asked to comment on Robin's contribution to *CineAction*, the magazine where we have been editorial colleagues, since its foundation. This began more than 20 years ago and in its conception we were on a mission. There was a Hollywood hit at the time whose heroes, the Blues Brothers, were on a mission from God—for many of us at that founding, given Robin's already immense stature in film studies, a discipline that as Christopher Sharret recently put it, Robin Wood may be considered to have partly invented—we were on a mission with God. So obviously Robin had a tremendous influence on the project and probably added a bit of anxiety to the mixture as well.

Our mission was both modest and dramatic—just to try to publish a magazine of film criticism ourselves but it was a mission—a magazine of radical film criticism

First, we wanted to articulate a relationship to our radical political commitments—to socialism, to feminism, to gay liberation, for some of us to Marxism. Much writing in film studies at that time was rhetorically radical but we hoped to make that politics central to the magazine. Robin's work has always remained urgently militant from that day to this. Recently, he has expressed the opinion that *CineAction* has lost some of its radical edge over the years—perhaps we and our writers wearied by the long years of Reagan, the Bushes, Martin, Harper...and Robin characteristically set out to correct that with what has become his last edited issue—Protest and Revolution.

Second, we had a common antagonism, though from differing perspectives, to what then seemed to be a reigning orthodoxy of film theory—a mélange of Lacan, poststructuralism, avant-gardism, postmodernism—often identified crudely as Screen Theory. Clearly that orthodoxy waned over the decades, hopefully helped by debate and polemic in our pages. If film studies is still marked by scholastic theory-mongering, apolitical, and lingering sophistries, few talk of a unified Theory or postmodernism without a wink—and it also encompasses a pluralism that *CineAction* has encouraged and reflected.

Third, we wanted to produce and edit film criticism, theoretically and politically informed but not about theory, and here we have presented over 20 years, a vast amount of critical work on films from all over the world and throughout film history. Here, again, Robin's contribution has been immense and wide-ranging, again and again insisting, as editor and writer, on close readings of films—and this may not be seen as unique, since the discipline has been defined by, and often too limited by, textual analysis—but criticism that speaks in a personal voice. Robin's voice has been unique—as Peter Harcourt has put it so well, Robin opens up a film for us and opens up the world.

Finally, there are things we didn't plan but accomplished anyway. We didn't plan on becoming the leading film studies journal in Canada but we did become that, with a usefully agnostic, if not antagonistic, relationship to the official academy. We didn't plan on becoming so internationally recognized but we have established such a reputation and a community of readers and writers all over the world. We did not imagine making a crucial contribution to the critical and historical exploration of Canadian films and filmmakers but we have done that. The last few years have seen considerable growth in scholarly writing on Canadian film—if you look, you will see *CineAction* connections all over that. We did not predict the explosion in world cinema that has been so important over the last decades but *CineAction* produced a considerable body of criticism on the exciting new films of Asia, Latin America and Africa. In all these unplanned accomplishments Robin's writing has continued to be central, illuminating once unnoticed corners of world cinema—from Canadian teen movies to the artistry of Kiarostami.

The balance sheet of *CineAction*?—modestly, we have kept producing a magazine of film criticism; more dramatically, we have helped change and grow the study of film. We have not changed the world altogether the way we imagined but we, and particularly Robin, have kept insisting that it *must* change. Robin, it has been an adventure to have been on *CineAction*'s radical mission with you.

PETER HARCOURT

For people of a certain age, there are key moments when many of us remember what we were doing at the time. Where were you on 22 November 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated? This was a recurring question. Another was: Where were you when Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon?

Well on that date, 20 July 1969, I was out at Welwyn Garden City just north of London having dinner with Robin Wood and his family, persuading him to abandon his teaching in the local grammar school to come out and join me at Queen's University in Kingston. That's how film appointments were made in those days!

And they were exciting days. Everything was just getting started and Robin came to virtually all my lectures, sometimes

disagreeing with me fervently, to the ecstatic delight of the students. When a change in Robin's domestic life catapulted him back to England, this time to Warwick University in Coventry, I visited him there and found him rather restless, largely because there was little for his partner to do in a town like Coventry. So when a job came up as Dean of Fine Arts in the old Atkinson College at York University, I suggested he apply and I brought him out again.

The rest is history. Loving him as a friend, I knew from the outset that Robin would contribute enormously to the discourse of film studies in this country; and this he has certainly done. To experience Robin discussing a film is not only to alter one's understanding of how films can be discussed but also of how they are related to the moral fabric of the social world.

Congratulations, Robin, at this moment of your roasting! I hope it's sufficiently rigorous that you might even be singed a little.

BRUCE LaBRUCE

I'm very happy and honoured to be here today to celebrate the worldly incarnation of Mr. Robin Wood, a great writer, a fantastic teacher, and, to borrow a phrase from George C. Scott in Richard Lester's film *Petulia*, a beautiful human being. I felt compelled to work an obscure movie reference into the first sentence of my presentation because one of the first things I learned in Robin's class was that you must know your obscure movie references, or at least it helped you to get noticed. Please note that I didn't call it "obscure movie trivia", because the word trivia tends to trivialize movie trivia. And if you know anything about Robin's cosmology, you would know that in it there is nothing trivial about the movies. In fact, that's one of the first things I learned from him about film criticism: everything signifies something. Maybe I'll get into the Barthesian Codes or Christian Metz's Syntagmatic Relations a bit later—both of which, incidentally, I learned about for the first time in Robin's classes, notwithstanding his evident and sometimes indignant distaste for some of the more lurid and meretricious aspects of French Poststructuralism. Then again, I probably won't get into the Barthesian Codes or Syntagmatic Relations, because frankly, it's been a while. And as fond as I remain of hermeneutics and "la grand syntagmatique", I do like to consider myself a recovering academic.

Although I have a memory on a par with Guy Pearce's in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, I do remember the first time I walked into one of Robin's classes. It was a night course at Atkinson College that I was taking in my second year of the Film Program here at York; it was a Hollywood survey course; and the first movie of the year to be screened was a John Ford western—probably *My Darling Clementine*, if memory serves, which it often doesn't. I clearly recall my first impressions of Robin: that he was a strikingly handsome man—dare I say, a dashing fellow—with a slightly stuffy posh British accent which I immediately forgave him on account of his adorable stutter. Considering his Marxist sympathies, I don't think the posh

accent would have worked at all well without the stutter, which somehow aligned him in my mind more with Eliza Doolittle than with Professor Henry Higgins. Anyway, I remember in the discussion after his lecture about the movie, Robin asked the class if anyone knew the name of the actor who played Morgan Earp, the brother of Wyatt Earp, played by Henry Fonda. Although I was always loathe to speak out too much in class, I did pride myself somewhat on my knowledge of movie trivia—or untrivia, shall we call it—having been raised on Hollywood movies, so I put up my hand and gave what I was pretty confident was the right answer: Ben Johnson. Of course the correct answer was Ward Bond. But Robin told me that it was a perfectly respectable guess, and that encouraged me enormously.

Of course at that time I had little idea what I was getting myself into. I did have a bit of an entree with Robin from the start: my eldest sister was best friends at the time with Florence Jacobowitz, who was then in her first year of graduate school and one of Robin's star pupils. But regardless of your connections, you always had to stand on your own merits with Robin, and prove your pudding, as it were. I immediately started to study Robin's early, seminal books on the work of Arthur Penn, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, and Claude Chabrol, which dazzled me with their critical rigour and insight, and I began to familiarize myself with a little throwaway essay of his called "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic", which was first published, I believe, in *Film Comment* magazine in 1978, a mere two years before I first met him. Having myself grown up on a farm, and having attended high school in a small town in Ontario in the seventies, I was still at the time in that half-closet-y dream state that some of you may be familiar with, so I have to give props to Robin for paving the way out of the closet for me—with a steamroller. Of course I wasn't married with three children, as Robin was when he publicly acknowledged his homosexuality, so it wasn't as difficult for me, but I was always impressed by the courage that it must have taken to act as he did in those circumstances so early on in "the movement", as we once called it, and to incorporate it aggressively and politically in his work. Robin was my first mentor as a gay activist, and helped to inaugurate what I always used to call my painful process of politicization, and I remain in my work today an activist of sorts owing to his early influence and example. And I do thank him for that. We were of course a little hotbed of political agitation up at Atkinson when we started our very own magazine of quasi-Marxist, full-on feminist film criticism, *CineAction!* I'm proud to have been on the original editorial collective of the magazine, which was comprised mostly of Robin and his graduate students. I have many fond memories of those times—from the usually relaxed, occasionally volatile—where's Kass Banning?—Sunday afternoon editorial meetings at Robin and Richard's apartment, to the actual production of the first dozen or so issues of the magazine, for which I literally cut and pasted the galleys alongside of Stuart Ross in the offices of the *Excalibur*. And then of course there were the occasional weekend parties, which are now, I'm sure, at least in our own minds, legendary. Let's just say I can never remember Robin and Richard running out of booze at a party, which is no small distinction.

It's impossible to do justice in a short speech to all the lessons learned and experiences gained from Robin, who has

always been so generous with his time, his expertise, and his spirit. If you looked up the word "largesse" in the dictionary, you might find Robin's picture beside it. I took courses with him for three years as an undergraduate, which included a phenomenal course on genre and a dazzling one on Japanese cinema, concentrating on Ozu, Mizoguchi, Kurosawa, and Oshima, which sticks with me still. As a graduate student I acted as an assistant-cum-projectionist for a couple of his classes, and he was the supervisor for my Master's Thesis, a shot-by-shot analysis of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. (To put this in antedeluvian perspective, this was before the advent of VHS, so I had to use a special projector that allowed one to stop the frame in the gate to examine it without burning the film.) Most of the courses were at night, and I have fond memories of standing on the packed bus back down to the subway beside Robin after a long, exhausting day, still discussing film with unembarrassed enthusiasm.

In closing, I just want to thank Robin for being such a great role model for me, as corny as that may sound. First of all, I want to thank him for his glamour. I was always so impressed at seeing his book, *Hitchcock's Films*, immortalized in the film *Day for Night* as one of Truffaut's favourite books. This really made me want to be a published writer myself, and indeed Robin helped get some of my writing published for the first time, in *Movie* magazine. I was also impressed by Robin's stories of visiting Arthur Penn out west on the set of *Little Big Man*, or Martin Scorsese in New York on the set of *King of Comedy*, for which he scored a production assistant position for our fellow *CineAction!* alum, Lori Spring, which I was totally jealous of. Robin's love of cinema was so palpable and infectious, and it always included an appreciation of the people behind the films and the process of making them. I'm sure it was this enthusiasm that contributed to my becoming a film-maker myself after I left university. And finally, I just want to thank him for being such a great homo. He really provided me with an early example of the romance of homosexuality, and what a satisfying and rewarding experience it can be. And in a world in which gays aren't always treated with much respect or enthusiasm, that's a great lesson to learn. Thanks Robin.

BART TESTA

This text was prepared for the Robin Wood Roundtable at the Film Studies of Canada Conference held at York University in 2006. It was a very informal parade of gushing appreciations of Robin Wood. This text has been only lightly revised in the faint hope of de-gushing it.

I have been reading Robin Wood's books and articles since I was a college student, reading them alongside those of Andrew Sarris, Jonas Mekas, Stanley Kauffman, and Susan Sontag. I felt at the time that these critics gave me a ringside seat on the rise of a new cinema, one of the most exciting things I then wanted badly to know about but scarcely understood. I still read a number of Wood's writings every year. Now that I am a college film instructor, I read Wood's writings with my students. I am absolutely sure that I am not alone among teachers in doing so.

There are some dozen books that Robin Wood has written, not counting the republished ones that are sometimes substantial expansions and revisions of earlier editions, like *Hitchcock's Films* and *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan*. There are also many articles and chapters in periodicals and collections, conference papers and lectures. His participation in the British magazine *Movie* and guiding hand at the Canadian *CineAction* have been crucial and formative.

The range of Wood's critical topics runs from Antonioni to the horror film, Scorsese to Bergman, classical Japanese films to American melodramas, German films and both the Rays, the American rebel and the Bengali master. I would suggest, as many have, that Wood was one of those film critics who spanned, at an important time, the considerable distance that we can now measure retrospectively between film criticism written in the format of journalism and cinema studies written in the drier form of an academic discipline. The journalistic side of his writing accounts for his prolific output over many years and the presence of his indelible personality. Wood early developed the working critic's habit of writing regularly which few tenured academics, whose writing must stand up—very slowly, and prepare to duck—under the hard scrutiny of peer review, have managed to cultivate. Given the sprawl of Wood's subject matter and his large output, there is no way to acknowledge the range of his publications, or their many particular contributions, or offer any especially useful assessment of their collected import, beyond my inclinations toward some blanketing assertions. So, let me lay out just three points.

The first is by way of a formal, institutional recognition —as yet not forthcoming with something like a proper *Festschrift*—of what the tribe of film teachers and critics must acknowledge: namely, Robin Wood got there first and did so often and repeatedly on assorted film-critical topics. There are not many critics who do this. Susan Sontag is another. In a famous instance of Wood's generation, a point on which Robin himself pointedly remarks in a published revisitation to Bergman's *Persona*, Sontag understood what Bergman's film signified, as she did Godard's project, and Bresson's style. But Sontag was, overall, unsympathetic to Bergman. One can understand why, given his customary layering of weighty symbols and the impasto of thick significance that lay over his films, she was a bit repelled. But Sontag appreciated the stripped down quality of *Persona*, which she took to be a refusal of any interpretation. The belated arrival of a laconic modernist cadence inside one of the most ambiguous and yet significant narrative filmmakers struck her as the important implication of *Persona*.

Sontag was only very selectively any kind of film (as opposed to literary) auteurist. Wood, writing almost simultaneously on Bergman, was a card-carrying one. Like his *Movie* colleagues, he participated in an "excitement" (the word Wood uses) of a discovery of the expanded field of meanings that was becoming available to filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s and no one more than Bergman illustrated. Wood's treatment of *Persona* was clearly a "reading" that centered on the film's troubled two characters and on what Bergman meant to say with them. What modern cinema's indulgence in ambiguity paradoxically stabilized in English-speaking film criticism, and

what it created for its context, and developed for its formative protocols, all came from just such an excited initiation into challenging tasks of interpretations of difficult movies. Wood's ethos was the humanist's interpretation-against-modernism, not Sontag's modernism-against-interpretation. But they shared an "excitement" over the same cinematic objects and the cultural novelty that arrived with them—a cinema that required the closest kind of attention.

Although there are degrees of this sort of thing, by which I mean the originality with which critics, in their excitement, framed such interpretative tasks, David Bordwell rightly characterizes the situation for criticism at the time describing when he writes,

The interpreter's exemplar is a canonical study—and essay or book which influentially crystallizes an approach or an argumentative strategy. [Such a text] is frequently anthologized, widely taught and constantly cited. The exemplar instantiates what the field is about: if it is progressive, it shapes future work; if it has been superceded, it must still be acknowledged, attacked, quarreled with...academic critics write in the shadow of exemplars (*Making Meaning*, 25).

Some twenty pages later in his *Making Meaning* Bordwell explains clearly how the *Movie* critics, and these include Paul Meyesberg, Ian Cameron, Richard Jeffrey, V.F. Perkins, and Robin Wood, achieved that kind of preeminence that goes with the writing of the "interpreter's exemplar." And Wood's interpretations were and remain exemplary. We tend to forget what Wood's book on Bergman meant to readers and critics in the 1960s. Perhaps because it has been eclipsed over time by his other books of that time—the ones on Hawks and Hitchcock—which represent an interpretive project to which Wood and cinema studies have alike remained committed and to which he himself regularly returned. Bergman's films now instead seem to belong to another kind, if not era, of film criticism that was not any longer to lie in Wood's—or Sontag's—future. I think many of Wood's writings have held the capacity of sometimes shaping future critical work, and when they do that "exemplary" shaping, they especially need and deserve to be "quarreled with."

The second point concerns a certain type of critic that writes—and really acts—in trust of his or her discernment. A critic can write exemplar-texts in more than one way. One type of critic instructs his or her colleagues by exemplifying the practice of criticism as an activity of discernment. This type of critic differs from another type, the type who propagates a doctrine or methodology, program or system of criticism, and who treats films in the main as textual illustrations. I have usually read Wood as the first type of critic: his sensibility, personality and discernment count for a great deal more than his system or doctrine. The two types of critic cannot, except very naively, be distinguishable in any absolute way. There are ideas and semi-systematic concepts in all critical writing however impressionistic. Without some large capacity for discernment, no systematic critic can be persuasive. Sometimes what makes the first kind of exemplar-critical essay or book important is the insight and interpretation that got it right the first time. Wood did this

when writing on Hawks and on other Hollywood directors, effectively co-generating an auteurist program for a range of American classical directors.

However, let me say that even when a somewhat older Wood was being much more programmatic, and his discussion of horror films in *The American Nightmare* and its satellite essays is the obvious case in point. Wood still discriminates among the films. Tobe Hooper or George Romero or David Cronenberg or Brian De Palma matter to him singly as directors almost as much as his Marcusian psycho-social interpretation of the symbolic substratum of the horror genre's cycle in the late 1960s-early 1970s. Although Wood's principle agenda was to intervene with an interpretation of horror movies of this period, (and he took the cycle to be, if not definitive, then at least climactic for the genre), he still required, for himself and his readers, that we discriminate films and directors—and this was a requirement laid down under tough circumstances. Where, after all, was one to see the differences between *The Exorcist*, *Carrie*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes* and *Shivers*? Well, Wood saw and located differences or persuaded us that he had. He furthermore made it an obligation that every critic do the same when talking about horror movies. So, quite aside from the catnip appeal of Wood's Freudian-Marxian interpretive grid for horror, held out to critics weary of laboring up the steep Lacanian incline hoping to get the politics of the shot-reverse shot (i.e., suture theory), here was hotter stuff to parse (Sex itself! Transgressions! Cannibalism! Repressive family values! Incest!).

Sensationalism is not, however, what made the essays in and around *American Nightmare* a founding moment in reformatting the horror genre; it was Wood's insistence on a genre with many individual distinguishable films, whereas previously there had been very few. Even though Wood's program was undeniably his crux of the matter—and his big slap shot into the gut of semiotic formalism into which leftist British film criticism kneaded itself since the 1970s—the reformatting the horror's interpretive template in cinema studies lies in discerning degrees of the films' singular own interventions and different inflections of horror's psycho-social implications. To all that Wood gave a novel program for the horror whose genre-durable appeal to film academics in an important sense came from both kinds of exemplary criticism embodied in a single writer.

The consequences of the differences that lay between discernment (even when mixed with a heady programmatic criticism) and method (by which I mean a method standing theoretically alone) should not be lost on us at a time when cinema studies have become so given to programmatic practices of interpretation that Bordwell refers to us collectively as "Interpretation Inc."

The differences within the discerning critic can be, however, paradoxical: on one hand, a kind of erotic engagement with film. Wood writing at top steam on Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* can stand as one instance (of many) of that erotic inclination in him. On the other, a constant moral scrutiny. These twin capacities—to enjoy deeply (and speak cogently of that enjoyment) and to judge ethically (and to show how this matters)—produce a tension and can protect a critical writer from the indulgence into which mere cinephilia can suck

him, and from the clever moral or political bromides that can easily be wrung from films under application of a few catch-phrases. Nowhere are these twin qualities better, more tautly, displayed than in Wood's books on Hawks and Hitchcock. But they are everywhere—for instance in the pieces on Godard's *Bande à part*, *Alphaville* and *Weekend*, and the seldom (and excellent) re-read essay on Makavejev's *Switchboard Operator*, and the better known article on *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.

It is alongside these qualities, which bind in an action which feels like virtue, however, that Wood's flaws as a critic are likewise displayed whenever the pleasure-ethical tension goes slack. His tendency to over-praise, sometimes like a defensive movie reviewer, in the midst of a close description of a film shows that critical rapture over a film's nuances is a tippy business. His lapses from ethical discrimination into thumpy moralizing manifest a peculiar schoolmarmish mistrust of his discernment. I am not now speaking about his later commitments to feminism and gay liberation. But earlier, for example, for him to protest in the face of the casual cruelties so naturally a part of Hawks' comedies, like *His Girl Friday*, as he does, suggests that Wood is not willing to admit, though he *must* have noticed this, that Hawks' mean cutting edges are as much part of the "vitality" of these comedies—a vitality Wood so admires—of the 1930s and of Hawks' young protagonists. Wood tellingly prefers the aging Hawks' later comedies, where I find an unattractive softening, sometimes even slackening, though they certainly manifest that other great Hawks theme for Wood, integration, or "integrity." It is the ethical theme, vitality the erotic one. (It never seems to have dawned on Wood, who cleverly put *Bringing Up Baby* beside horror films, that in the later Hawks, the leopard Baby would give birth to erotic monstrosities, the heroines of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *The Land of the Pharaohs*, films Wood dismissed as minor, and that Hawks put them closely beside *The Thing*.)

For another example, what Wood thinks Hitchcock *means* with *The Birds* is hard to believe (but Wood is sharp on the next one, *Marnie*), and even to try to explain *The Birds* in earnest is perhaps to miss in Hitchcock another more extreme case of cruel comedy than is to be found anywhere in Hawks. The world is just about coming to an end and the hero is still trying to work things out with Mom. At times, Wood's flaw, which is mostly a matter of his virtue suddenly taking on a foreign accent or a mis-chosen emphasis in his interpreting, can become a full-on lapse of a sensibility into categorical self-division. The essay on *Letter from an Unknown Woman* goes on for many excellent pages of analysis and description—Ophüls' delicate/tough film has never before or since been in such gentle firm hands—only to fumble toward the end into out-and-out political catechetics. Sometimes whole essays tumble this way, as does Wood writing on Martin Scorsese (in *Vietnam to Reagan*), despite his important (and still underappreciated) decision to target *The King of Comedy* as the key Scorsese text, which it could well have been in the early 1980s, if only we could remember Scorsese back that far.

The third point—on the consequences of the types of criticism—comes by taking notice of a classic dispute—between Wood and Peter Wollen on the matter of Hawks. Wood shows how the difference between discernment and system that I

have been belaboring here can sometimes work out. Wood's essay "Hawks De-Wollenized" (in *Personal Views*) is one the several pieces he wrote resisting the lures of *Screen* theory in the 1970s (this is before *The American Nightmare* offered an alternative), in this case responding to Wollen's (and Alan Lovell's) attempt to recast the auteur theory in structuralist terms. Wollen's success with this attempt, in one of the three essays comprising *Signs and Meaning in Cinema*, might have been short-lived (structuralist auteurism had the life span of a fruit fly) but it still contributed to that book's exemplary status. The object in question is the "Hawks text" and how it is to be constituted in a critical description. Wollen's purpose was largely methodological and systematic. Better than half the essay is devoted to John Ford, whom Wollen regards as a "richer" filmmaker, basically because there was more in his film to structure.

Structuralism promised to take us past critical discernment toward an objective criticism. As we know, that pretense did not fare well even in the shorter run but it was succeeded by other proposals that continued the intent to render film studies some kind of science. Wood's rejoinder to Wollen is both specific and general. The specific thing is his defense of Hawks' humane reputation, which he sees Wollen impugning. Wood undertakes especially to dispute the modeling of Hawks' ethical system that Wollen proposes—but does not quite notice he is proposing as an ethic. In accumulating the counter-examples that he does, Wood discloses that Wollen's veiled suspicion of Hawksian groups lies in the meaning he suggests through certain loaded terms—as "elite" or "exclusive," etc. The program of discerning binary oppositions Wollen develops results in a modeling of Hawks as a textual system or structure that makes Hawks seem at once brittle and atavistic, fascist and boyish at once. Although Wood was the first to organize Hawks' complicated, multi-genre output into two groups, comedy and drama, and Wollen was, in key respects, just elaborating on him in a structuralist fashion, Wood shows that the Hawksian groups are too variously made up, film by film, for Wollen's elaboration to stand scrutiny, so Wollen gets the Hawks ethic all wrong. For students—who will always prefer Wollen's diagram of Hawks to Wood's discernment of variables in the films themselves—the value of comparing the still close but competing claims in this dispute is considerable. I do not believe that Wood in any sense demolishes Wollen. However, the course correction he provides does show the advantage of taking up films and testing them singly before accepting any system-generated account of them.

In the end, on the more general side, Wood does not settle his beef with Wollen simply by showing that he has mismanaged his examples or that Wollen has done just because he covertly harbours a dislike of Hawks. Rather, Wood asks, are we interested in "abstractions that can be made from an artist's work or are we interested in works of art?" In his 1963 essay "The Structuralist Activity" Roland Barthes answered that question for a school of critics that was soon to grow very large: the art work is to be made into another kind of object, which Barthes calls a simulation. This is what Wood means by an abstraction. How Wood replies to such a proposal is to declare "for art [that is] concrete and specific." To get to the concrete requires the erotic engagement with films—but the moral rightness of an interpretation comes in the dedication to get the

artist's ethic right by doing so. Wood's presumption is that it is only through attention paid closely to the "vitality" of the films which dwell in "the concrete and specific" features of them that a critic finds the ethic. Such a searching and finding is what is a consequence of habitual discernment.

I am not sure whether Robin Wood would accept a word that I have written about him. I am not sure whether he still believes the same things in the writings I have mentioned or believes them the same way today. However, no one can miss the way he insists on his unchanging commitments in the fresh editions of his books. But he equally insists that he had added to these commitments. And of course he has. A lifetime given to the activity of criticism would have to result in an ongoing expansion of these—unless the writer has become a certain kind of academic critic. That fortunately has never happened to Robin Wood.

JANINE MARCHESSAULT

I first met Robin Wood in 1983 when I came to York University in Toronto to pursue graduate studies. He taught a course called *The Structure of Film*. It was a fantastic seminar that included close textual analyses of such diverse films as *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Ophüls 1948), *Ugestu Monogatari* (Mizoguchi 1953) and of course the major discovery for me and everyone in the class, *I Walked with a Zombie* (Tourneur 1943). Each of these films was lovingly dissected, frame by frame, to reveal the inner workings and hidden structures that gave them their unique aesthetic force. Robin also insisted that Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1970) be read alongside the films as a means to engage the class in thinking about intertextuality, psychoanalysis, cultural codes and the nature of narrative. This was my introduction to a critical practice of reading the text that combined aesthetics, politics and cultural theory.

My remarks centre on the relationship between pedagogy and writing that Robin forged in his teaching and in his criticism. It is a relationship that has had a profound and lasting influence on me, as it has on so many of his former students. I will focus on two aspects of this relationship. The first is his commitment to a humanist criticism, and to a socialist politic (feminist and queer) that finds a place for the "recognition of individual skills, intelligence, emotion: a Marxism informed by feminism and the revelations of psychoanalytic theory".

What does this mean?

I believe that it was in *CineAction* #8 (1987) that Robin came out. He came out as a Leavisite, or rather a Leavisian since Leavisites, he would tell us, are a cult that clings too tightly to the word of the Father. The term "Leavisian" indicates a sympathy towards, but not strict adherence to, F. R. Leavis's most progressive and original insights. Interestingly, two of the greatest film critics working and teaching in English Canada today, Peter Harcourt and Robin Wood, and one of the most influential Canadian media scholars' Marshall McLuhan, were all educated at Cambridge and studied with Leavis. Each was influenced by the New Critics' stress on reading as a cultural practice. While

many have been critical of Leavis's approach to education as elitist, Robin is sympathetic to the idea that culture (literature for Leavis) requires training and an educated sensibility. For Leavis reading is a serious undertaking and Robin reminds us that three words: "seriousness", "intelligence" and "significance" are integral aspects of his critical practice, which links art to life. These words are also very close to Robin's own critical lexicon, lest we forget his landmark question early on his career, "should we take Hitchcock seriously?" We know the answer, but this question does not receive a once a for all declaration. Rather the answer depends on the social reality, the context in which it is being posed.

In his essay "Leavis, Marxism and Film Culture", Robin calls attention to Leavis's commitment to a writing and reading practice that challenges the barriers between the classroom and the world outside. Leavis's major contribution to critical thinking was expressed in his project to transform the study of culture by emphasizing the present situation, one that is contemporaneous with the experiences of the student, with the educational institution and the social world. This approach to teaching means engaging directly with the context in which the culture being studied belongs. Thus, in a lecture or a piece of film criticism by Robin Wood, the spheres of the everyday, the political situation in all its multiple layers from the state of university teaching to magazine publishing in Canada, are part of reading the text. Like teaching, criticism is a pedagogical act of reading culture, of engaging one's mind with what is just beyond the window and of creating a community of writers who read. Leavis founded the important cultural journal *Scrutiny* that would extend his pedagogical practice to a larger reading public. Similarly, with a collective of sympathetic co-conspirators (many of them former students), Robin Wood was involved in helping to form the editorial collective of *CineAction!*, a magazine committed to radical film criticism. This magazine provided a place to debate, to present a diversity of film readings, and to express shared political interests. It is also a place for discovery, where one can write and read about small, overlooked, forgotten or 'neglected' films. *CineAction!* has also generously nourished a new generation of young film and media critics, often giving them their first opportunity to publish.

For Robin, the function of criticism at the present time should be to: "lead the sympathetic consciousness into new places" (Leavis) and this "involves a constant readiness to change and modify one's own positions as one's perception of human needs changes." (*CineAction!* 8, 1987) Here we can see the direct link between criticism and pedagogy at work. It is no exaggeration to say that Robin Wood's sensibilities (literally his sensory functions), his knowledge of film, music and cultural history are astounding. Trained to read film before the luxury of video and DVDs, his capacity to recollect large chunks of dialogue, visual sequences and blocking, his sensitivity to minute transitions in light and sound, his ability to detect nuances in narrative tone and affect, are unrivaled. There is only one way to describe sitting in a classroom with him or reading a piece of criticism by him. Whether it be an essay on his favorite Canadian film director, William MacGillivray, or a critical comparison between George

Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985) and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), the encounter is always challenging in very surprising and intellectually exciting ways. Evaluation is central to the practice of criticism and reflects upon the relation between art and life. Robin's teaching and writing are never predictable because he is open to the world and to the text in that world. This is of course, the mark of the "serious" teacher and critic: he takes risks, he takes you on unexpected journeys to discover marvels or pretentiousness in the detritus of ordinary or extraordinary culture. This puts him in a category with film critics and philosophers as diverse as Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Peter Harcourt, Stanley Cavell, Richard Dyer and more recently, R. Ruby Rich and Slavoj Žižek. All of these writers and philosophers write through a pragmatics that is both deeply personal and committed to expanding the world through their writing on art and culture. Theirs is writing that enriches the public sphere by inviting a conversation that reaches backwards towards a history of writing and forward to consider what is of value and worth preserving in a common culture. They seek to educate, to share their own grounded experiences and analyses of films, theoretical and political frameworks and social contexts, while shunting criticism's institutionalization within academic and/or commercial forms of writing. Robin Wood's long time commitment to Adult Education reflects both his deep pedagogical commitment and his rejection of anything that is elitist (including culture). His creation of a Film Studies program at Atkinson College that was devoted to Adult Education at York University, his stubborn impatience with theorizing that abstracts experience from films (with too many footnotes that stray too far from the object of analysis), his sometimes less than polite interactions with me over what constitutes elite culture (we had many 'conversations' around certain kinds of experimental film and video art for example which he believed were purposefully obscure), are all reminders for me of an exemplary committed practice—the practice of assuming a certain responsibility towards culture.

I said that I would mention two aspects of Robin's practice as a teacher and critic that have influenced me. So far I touched upon the radical humanism behind his critical practice. The second aspect is much more ephemeral and personal. It is found in his deep love of cinema. This is not just a cinephilic love of cinema, which always seems to me to be mired in some sense of mastery, the specialist club that is often filled with macho snobbishness that is antithetical to the joy of collective spectatorship. Robin's love of cinema allows him to appreciate some of Hollywood's recent teen movies as well as the films of Ozu. He is able to accommodate different practices and to recognize in them a common political and aesthetic palette.

Robin introduced me to so many films, some of which lead me into new places, producing that change in consciousness that great works of art and great teachers accomplish. One such film continues to stand above the rest, and that is Jacques Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974) which resulted in a short piece that was published in an early issue of this magazine (#2). I will be forever grateful to Robin for introducing me to this film, for our conversations around it, and for encouraging me to explore some its many enigmas.