Letters on film and film criticism

29 December 2009

On "Film critic Robin Wood dies at 78"

Thank you, David, for this really open and distinguished commentary you have written on Robin's life and work. Since I had the privilege of studying at Warwick University during 1976-77 and keeping in touch with him over the years (we last spoke on the phone a month ago), I regard your comments as a very significant documentation of Robin's achievements. I recently learned that Robin did not want Canadian citizenship since it would mean taking an oath of loyalty to the Queen, and he was republican minded and very much opposed to institutions.

Like F.R. Leavis, Robin was an outsider in the academic establishment but, unlike his mentor, exhibited a high level of humanitarian feeling and generosity that is very rare today, either inside or outside the academic world. I believe Andrew Britton may have mentioned Trotsky to him, although I don't think Robin read many of his works. Robin always criticized the appalling nature of our present society with the same intelligence and wit one finds in the work of this other distinguished cultural activist subjected to distortion and vilification (the *Service* biography being a recent example) throughout the years.

Joseph McBride described Robin as a "renaissance man" whose like we will never see again. This is true in terms of film criticism but, despite Robin's non-alignment with any political movement save that associated with gay and feminist liberation, his writings will continue to provide a positive source of fertile thought for that necessary change in the system that both he and Trotsky envisaged in different ways.

Tony W
21 December 2009

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As someone who came of age in the 1960s, I cannot overstate the importance of Robin Wood's books on Hawks and, especially, Hitchcock. They changed radically and permanently how I related to films, much as the work of Christian Metz was to do in the 1970s.

And Robin was to leave his mark again much later by insisting on the role and place of the modern American horror film. Unfortunately, that opportunistic documentary *The American Nightmare* simply exploits his name and fame and interviews people with no particular competence in the field, such as Tom Gunning, instead of turning to Robin and other well-known specialists such as Tony Williams.

There is little to add to Robin's comments, typically scathing and typically accurate, on contemporary Hollywood, except to say that he and his commitment to thinking against the grain will be sorely missed.

Thanks for this fine tribute.

Reynold H
Paris, France
21 December 2009

On "Why are the critics lauding Avatar"

One doesn't have to look far to find out why so many movie critics, especially the ones in the print media, seem to love *Avatar* despite the plot being so derivative and stereotyped that you can see the stitches where part of the story of Pocahontas is joined to some re-enactment of Custer's Last Stand, among other things. I saw *Avatar* myself to see what the fuss was about, and the first thing you see before the movie even starts is that it is produced by 20th Century Fox, which is the movie subsidiary of News Corporation. This organisation also owns *The Wall Street Journal* and many other print newspapers and magazines. So it's entirely possible that many movie critics may be under some pressure to pronounce a movie made by the corporation that employs them to be excellent.

What I particularly disliked about my movie experience was not so much the movie itself but all the advertisements for various unrelated products that referenced *Avatar* in some way. Computer games that, perhaps ironically, are not in the spirit of the New Age-y philosophy of the movie—the games challenge the player to "conquer" some part of the fictional Pandora moon—were being advertised. I hear also that the two main actors in the movie, Sam Worthington and Zoe Saldanha (both very workman-like in their acting), have signed up for a possible sequel. It would be unlike News Corporation not to pounce on any opportunity to squeeze more profit out of *Avatar* if it can. As the cliché goes, stay tuned for more developments.

Jennifer H
26 December 2009

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David Walsh's review is right on as usual. However, he complains, "How can any of this encourage critical thought?" Well, David, when has it ever been the purpose of anything to come out of Hollywood to "encourage critical thought?" Surely

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you jest?

Walsh later levels a complaint against “stereotypes and clichés” that might actually be the intentional program of Hollywood: to “falsify life and stunt thinking.”

Bruce
23 December 2009

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I thought that was a very harsh review of *Avatar*. I would have liked to see some of the action sequences cut out in favor of developing the story more and agree that it was somewhat predictable, though not how it would play out. What I found particularly harsh was your criticism of the dialog. I found it a little disingenuous that some of the native people spoke English as well as they did.

In my opinion it was still an outstanding movie with a strong anti-imperialist message.

I was looking through some reviews and it seems generally the mainstream USA mass media is also rather critical of the story. After watching it, I see their motives for such criticism are perfectly clear, but I am somewhat baffled by the harshness of your criticism.

Peter
27 December 2009

On “Inglourious Basterds: Quentin Tarantino goes to war”

I’ve read some of the WSWS’s reviews of films like *Kill Bill* and *Inglorious Basterds* and have enjoyed them. However, they’re pretty short and leave some in-depth discussion to be desired. I’m wondering if the WSWS has a comprehensive article on the subject of violence and violence in entertainment, be it film or sports or otherwise? Or books on the subject that you would recommend?

Basically I’d like to think I’m a non-violent person—despite being a young male in America. It seems I’m supposed to enjoy violence!

It seems that coming of age today in America means that sooner or later you’re going to be subjected to the violent books and films that are so prolific.

And I’m kind of sick of it.

I’ll just start by listing some films off the top of my head that I’ve seen and really would rather that I hadn’t: *Saw III*, *Kill Bill 1 & 2*, *Casino Royale*, *Fargo*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Rambo II/III/IV* (I liked the first one though, despite its defense of the military), etc.

I met a new friend and she has this friendly, bubbly personality. She mentioned she got some books for Christmas and I asked her what kind of books she likes to read. Well out comes the stories of zombies, vampires, torture, serial killers, organs being eaten, bones being shattered, etc, etc. I cringe and a shiver goes down my spine. And I’m thinking to myself, why does it seem I’m the only person on the planet that’s repulsed by this? Why don’t I enjoy the scare of a disgusting horror/slasher film like so many people seem to? Is there something wrong with *me*?

It seems to me that violence is part of reality but it’s something I’d rather not be reminded of on a daily basis. In 24 years I’ve only witnessed a few violent acts, but in movies/books/etc I’ve probably seen depictions of several thousands of people being killed, lots of those depicted in gruesome detail.

I realize that historically there have been so many acts of atrocious violence carried out by mankind. Sure, I probably need to know this, but do I need to be reminded of them all the time, and see them depicted in all their glory?

I wonder if there is any value to all of this show of violence? I’ve seen all these horror films over the years, and I really have no desire to see one again. But eventually I’ll be invited and I’ll be the “stick in the mud” if I don’t want to go see the next bloodbath.

Certainly there have been depictions of violence where I’ve cheered the perpetrator as the creator intended. Maybe this is a sad thing to admit to, but a long time ago I saw *Kindergarten Cop* with Arnold Schwarzenegger. One of the parents of a student is abusing his child, so Arnold’s character confronts the guy and punches him in the face. You’re supposed to go yeah, he got him! I can understand the appeal of this, even though, if you think about it whacking some guy in the head really isn’t going to help anything. What I don’t understand is the appeal of movies like *Saw* series where people are tortured in all these horrible ways for little or no reason. Yeesh.

Like Bill Maher was curious about how “otherwise rational people could believe in ridiculous things like religion” in *Religulous* (I don’t feel like he answered that though), I’m curious about how otherwise “normal” people could enjoy the prolific amounts of violence in today’s entertainment. Why is this any better or healthier than Romans enjoying the battles of gladiators two millennia ago?

With the vast popularity of these films, it’s almost easy to accept the prevailing wisdom that this is simply how people work, and we should embrace the fact that people are sadistic. Is this really the conclusion to make, or is there another scientifically valid answer?

Jason
27 December 2009

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