

Film critic Robin Wood dies at 78

David Walsh
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British-born film critic Robin Wood died December 18 at the age of 78 in Toronto, where he had lived since the late 1970s.

Wood was one of the most serious writers on film in the 1960s and 1970s, and taught cinema studies for more than a decade at York University in Toronto, until his retirement in the early 1990s. He was associated with the film magazine *CineAction* for more than 20 years. His writing, including books on Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Ingmar Bergman, and Arthur Penn, influenced and continue to influence many critics, students and young people.

Educated at Cambridge, where he came under the influence of eminent literary critic F.R. Leavis, among others, Wood was an intellectual of some weight. He did not belong to the generation of critics who believed that writing about an art form that was also a medium of popular entertainment relieved them of the need to do research, to look attentively at the work in question, to see it in relation to various social processes, and, generally, to reflect deeply on its subject matter.

Wood's book on Hawks, one of Hollywood's most versatile and underrated directors, remains enormously valuable. It was an eye-opener to many when it appeared in the mid-1960s. In a 2001 introduction to a new edition of the book, Wood noted that the volume seemed to him the least in need of "qualification and/or apology" of any of his early works.

Hawks, asserted Wood in a 1981 introduction to the same book, was "not really a modern artist.... He is a survivor from the past, whose work has never been afflicted with this disease of self-consciousness. An artist like Hawks can only exist within a strong and vital tradition, and the weaknesses and limitations of his work are largely determined by those of the tradition that evolved him." He termed Hawks a "communal artist" of the first rank.

Wood's work on Michelangelo Antonioni, co-authored with Ian Cameron in 1968, also stands out. It reveals Wood as unperturbed by reputation and prepared to cut through a great deal of pretentious nonsense.

As Richard Phillips noted on the WSWS in 2004, Cameron and Woods "admire the director's artistic skills but perceptively point to one of the underlying weaknesses in his work—Antonioni's 'defeatist' approach.

"According to Wood," Phillips went on, "Antonioni's concentration on style became a means of avoiding more complex aesthetic and social questions. Wood argues that one of the functions of art is to make its recipients 'in some sense more *alive*—not necessarily happy...but alert, responsive, active. The whole movement of [the films] seems to work in the opposite direction, so that they become a sort of depressive aesthetic drug.'

"The artistry in Antonioni's movies, he continues, 'makes them the ideal medium for the self-indulgence of disillusioned intellectuals. Even their desolation is strangely comforting, because it is so little disturbed by any activeness of protest, and so beautifully expressed. There are many ways of seeking refuge from the complexities, confusions and anxieties of a profoundly disturbing age; Antonioni's retreat into a fundamentally complacent despair is a particularly subtle and insidious one, because it

gives the impression all the time of uncompromisingly confronting them.'

This is Wood at his best, and there is good deal more of that in his work, which deserves to be read and explored.

Joanne Laurier and I met with Wood in September 2000 at his Toronto apartment for several hours, and the conversation was posted on the WSWS. We reprint it below. Wood was very gracious and thoughtful, sharp on occasion, but always fair-minded. Our disagreement on political perspectives emerged clearly. He belonged to that layer of left intellectuals who held on to their commitment to social change and their revulsion against capitalism, without having the slightest confidence in any social force that could accomplish the overthrow of the existing order.

In the 1970s, Wood moved sharply to the left, but along with a reorientation of his personal life and a move to another country, this seems primarily to have meant "radical politics" of the gay rights, feminist variety. Although he was politically astute enough not to have accepted the identity of Stalinism with socialism (and in his preface to a revised edition of his *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, he called for "special attention" to be paid to Trotsky, "the most progressive of the early Marxist theorists"), the political problems of the working class movement in the twentieth century remained largely a closed book to him. He was hardly alone in this, of course.

As we noted in our original introduction to the 2000 interview, which took place during the Toronto film festival, "Wood came to left-wing ideas in middle age. As the interview will indicate, the political difficulties of the past several decades seem to weigh heavily on him. He expresses the desire for a revival of socialist principles and observes that his greatest wish was for 'world revolution,' but immediately adds that he felt such a perspective was 'hopeless.'"

His introduction to *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, written in March 1997, two and a half years before we spoke, seems to sum up his views. He explains that his life work now is "single-mindedly concerned with sexual politics."

Wood notes that he had "always retained belief in humanity, its enormous potential, its capacity to evolve and learn; hence a belief in a possible future. During the past two decades such a faith has become increasingly difficult to sustain."

He continues: "The relentless, seemingly inevitable 'progress' of capitalism in its 'advanced' stage...is destroying on all levels of society every possibility of a creative response to life, sweeping ineluctably on toward the physical destruction of life itself through the destruction of the planet." Wood adds: "While carefully resisting the lure of false hope, we cannot simply give up: there is always, as a last refuge, one's self-respect, and to give up is to lose it."

The morbid pessimism of the comments, to repeat, was hardly his alone, nor were the objective conditions (the collapse of the Soviet Union and the traditional labor movement under the pressure, above all, of economic globalization) that produced it of his making, but such views do have consequences. I think for Wood this increasingly meant rather strained efforts to find 'unconscious' subversiveness in a variety of older works, some of which did not merit the effort, and exaggerated claims for new

films (such as Gregg Araki's *The Doom Generation*, 1995), which collectively strike one as a somewhat desperate, and unnecessary, clutching at straws.

Whatever the difficulties in his work, however, Wood remained a man of integrity and artistic seriousness to the end. He was not one of those who gave in to the establishment in exchange for a cushy position, fame, and money. He never even came close to that. His best work will endure and enlighten new generations, who will have the good fortune to think and act in more historically favorable conditions.

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This is the conversation, originally posted in October 2000:

David Walsh: I was curious about your feelings about this film festival and about film festivals in general.

Robin Wood: If I was running it, I would be much more selective. I've seen a number of films which I don't think merit being in a festival.

DW: Off the record, which ones?

RW: On the record. Well, the first one I saw—*Maelström* [Denis Villeneuve]. I thought it was facile and cheap. I don't know how many films should be in a festival.

Two that I was rather impressed by were the rather obvious ones, *Code Inconnu* [Michael Haneke] and *Yi Yi* [Edward Yang]. Two opposite poles of cinema. One extreme, sort of formalist, structural experimentation; the other, old-fashioned, about characters and what they do and how they relate, how they develop, what they find out about. I'm a great admirer of Michael Haneke.

DW: Do you feel that the festival has changed in character?

RW: I think it has become more and more what it always was. I came here two years after the festival had already begun (23 years ago), so I don't know how it actually started. But it has certainly grown enormously, it's become much more embedded in corporate capitalism, with all these sponsors. Everybody, all these firms, putting money into it. I hate all that. Again, you can see why they've done it, because it gets them more money and all that. I would have preferred a more modest festival and not have to stick to that kind of thing.

DW: Do you think this has had any aesthetic or artistic consequences?

RW: I haven't thought about it. Not just off the top of my head. Do you?

DW: I've only been there seven years; it just gets bigger and bigger. I just wonder how long these various worlds will coexist. Maybe they can! It's hard to believe that there isn't going to be a price to pay at some point.

RW: I'm sorry they no longer do anything like the horror film retrospective, like Richard Lippe and I did in '78, called *The American Nightmare*. There was a film in the festival called *The American Nightmare*, which according to the catalogue was inspired by our retrospective. I had never heard anything like this until I opened up the catalogue. Nobody asked us if they could use our title, nobody asked us if they could use any material. I didn't see the film.

DW: For whom are you writing about the festival at this point?

RW: I'm going to do something in *CineAction* magazine. I'm editing the issue after the next, actually. The next one has just passed its deadline. My issue won't be out till January. It's going to include festival coverage. The five members of the collective will probably contribute, as we usually do. I don't know what I'm going to write about. It partly depends on whether I can see the films again. I find it so hard to write about a film after only seeing it once.

I retired from York ages ago. I'm a "professor emeritus," and such. I'm actually giving a course in January, a graduate course in Canadian film.

DW: What is your general feeling about Canadian films?

RW: It's unfortunate, but there are so few Canadian films that I really feel a strong commitment to. I would rather like some time to see all the Canadian films I can, to see whether there is more there than I thought. Or

to answer the question: why aren't there better Canadian films? One reason perhaps is the way funding operates in Canada. Because I know the situation of my favorite Canadian film director, William McGillivray—I continue to think that *Life Classes* is by far the best Canadian film I've ever seen, it's a wonderful film, it's a masterpiece. He's gone on to make one other film; I understand it's not quite at the same level, but very strong, very innovative. He's spent at least four years trying to raise money to make another film, for which he has a screenplay, which he let me read, which I think is excellent. He can't get any money for it. None of the funding agencies will provide the financing. I would love to see the films they do finance, to see what sort of films they're backing and why.

DW: Government agencies?

RW: Partly. Telefilm Canada, a big funding agency. Various government agencies.

DW: What is your attitude toward the contemporary commercial film industry?

RW: Only the most obvious things, I'm afraid. I've got nothing original to say. I find it enormously depressing. I hate a cinema that's been taken over by special effects. I've given up going to almost all of the contemporary action movies. I still enjoy action movies, I like exciting films, but I don't find the contemporary ones exciting. They're just boring. Often the first half-hour is interesting when the characters are being introduced, after that it's just explosions, explosions, more explosions, bodies being shattered, people falling off roofs. I find it noisy and boring.

There was a great deal of excitement at the end of last year about a wonderful new rebirth of Hollywood, supposedly all of these highly intelligent films—*Magnolia*, *American Beauty*, which I'm afraid I never went along with in the first place. Insofar as there was a revival, in any case, it's gone. I dislike *American Beauty* quite strongly, and I thought *Magnolia* was watchable, interesting. My favorite Paul Thomas Anderson film is his first, *Hard Eight* [1996]. I thought it was a really terrific small movie, really tight, beautifully made, beautifully acted, beautifully directed, very well written. I thought, how wonderful, there's somebody here, then *Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia*....

DW: What about so-called American independent films?

RW: A lot of the excitement seems to have gone here too. I remember the early days of the Sundance festival. It all seemed so exciting back then. I was really excited by the work of people like [Gregg] Araki and Richard Linklater. Araki seems to have gone downhill. I didn't like *Splendor* [1999] very much. Linklater continues to be interesting, but I wish he'd stop trying to make big Hollywood movies. He belongs in the independent arena. I loved *Before Sunrise* [1995]. *Newton Boys* was a very decent film, not a great film.

I enjoyed the *Hamlet* with Ethan Hawke very much. I thought he was terrific. He was the best screen Hamlet. Much better than Olivier and certainly than Kenneth Branagh. He was without the Olivier affectation and all of Branagh's self-consciousness. Branagh always seems to be saying, "Now to help you get this line, I'm going to put on an expression. This is important. Watch this."

I thought the women were marvelous in Branagh's *Hamlet*, Julie Christie and Kate Winslet. And Derek Jacobi. With Branagh, thought, there's always this ridiculous business. "Look here, I've even got Gerard Depardieu here, speaking about two lines, isn't that amazing? For me, in my film! Look at all these other stars I've got." I thought Charlton Heston was doing the Player-King marvelously, and then he was interrupted by the director cutting in Sir John Gielgud and Judi Dench running around in togas. I suppose to explain to the audience what the piece was about. It could have been Tweedledee and Tweedledum running around in togas for a start, it didn't have to be Sir John and Dame Judi. Again. "Look who I've got in my film." I'd much rather have watched Charlton Heston delivering the lines. I had very mixed feelings about the film.

DW: I had mixed feelings too, but I do believe that Branagh sincerely believes that Shakespeare can be popular and desires to present his work to a mass audience.

RW: I don't know. I'm less and less sure. I used to think so....

DW: Who are some of the contemporary filmmakers you admire?

RW: I'm afraid my answer is going to be very mainstream. The obvious names—Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang from Taiwan. And Ang Lee, ex from Taiwan. But not for his most recent film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which was a great disappointment. And then [Abbas] Kiarostami from Iran. I've seen two other very fine Iranian films at the festival, *Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine* [directed by Bahman Farmanara]. A director who was persecuted all these years making a film about himself and what a terrible life he's had. It could have been maudlin and self-pitying, and none of that was there. I liked *The Circle* very much, by Jafar Panahi. And another Iranian film, *The Day I Became a Woman* [Marziyeh Meshkini]. A lovely film. So unexpected, the little girl, quite unpredictable and charming. And conscious, not charming in an innocuous sense.

I like a number of Icelandic film directors. I liked Fridrik Thor Fridriksson's film, *Angels of the Universe*. I liked the Hans Petter Moland film, *Aberdeen*, from Norway. *Zero Kelvin* [1996], by Moland, is a very fine film. On one level it's a kind of intelligent version of *Straw Dogs*. There are other things going on as well.

The director I'm longing to see some more of is Thomas Vinterberg, from Denmark. I thought *Celebration* [1998] was tremendous. I loved it. I saw it several times. A very unusual film. I interviewed him, I was very impressed with him as well. It's been two years and he hasn't made another film. Lars von Trier I haven't made out yet. I still don't know what I think of *Breaking the Waves* [1996]. It's very impressive on a certain level, but I don't think I care for the theme of the sacrificial woman. And all that extraordinary religious stuff at the end, with the miracles, I didn't know what to make of that.

DW: How do you feel about Terence Davies?

RW: I liked his early films. I didn't see *The House of Mirth*.

DW: I liked it very much. I thought it was far better than Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* [1993].

RW: Oh, I loved that film.

DW: What about Europeans?

RW: Michael Haneke. I have a lot of catching up to do. An awful lot I haven't seen.

Joanne Laurier: How do you feel about the films of Bertrand Tavernier?

RW: I like them very much. I think it's shameful that his films are not shown here. I don't know why. They do come out on video. *Capitaine Conan* [1996], *L'Appât* [1995], *Daddy Nostalgie* [1990], *L.627* [1992]. Deeply human. We interviewed him for *CineAction*. I don't think a film of his has been released generally since *A Sunday in the Country* [1984]. It's very odd. I still like Claude Chabrol. *Ceremony* [1995] was a terrific movie. Eric Rohmer I sort of dropped out on a long time ago, and I've only just started getting back to him. I liked *Autumn Tale* [1999] very much. Now I want to see all of his recent films. You can't see everything. I dropped out on [Jean-Luc] Godard a long time ago.

DW: Godard dropped out on Godard a long time ago. Most of the French films I saw at this festival I didn't like very much. I thought they were cold and impersonal and pretentious, produced from recipe books. They had all the right ingredients, all the right influences, but no real feeling or serious thought.

RW: I've only seen one Olivier Assayas film. I've forgotten what it was called. I thought it was pretty good.

DW: In terms of some of the filmmakers you wrote about in the past, have you maintained the same views, or reevaluated them, or changed them in any way?

RW: Hitchcock, of course. I've written a good deal about him. Hawks,

no, I feel more or less the same about Hawks. Although *Rio Bravo* is possibly becoming my personal favorite film of all time. Ever since I came to the conclusion that the whole world situation was hopeless, and that nothing would arrest the horrors, and the only thing left was to maintain one's self-respect, if one can. I don't see what's going to arrest the onslaught of global capitalism. I hope that I'm wrong.

DW: I think you are.

RW: World revolution is the only thing, and I can't see how that could possibly happen.

DW: That's our perspective. I don't share your pessimism, but perhaps we could set that question aside for the moment.

JL: Your view of Hitchcock...

RW: I wrote my first book on Hitchcock in the 1960s, when I was just a 30-year-old kid. I did a kind of update, *Hitchcock Revisited* in the 1980s.

DW: Could you possibly summarize some of your reconsiderations?

RW: I think what's been crucial to any work on Hitchcock has been the work of radical feminists in the late 1960s, early 1970s. First, they launched an attack on Hitchcock because of all the persecution of women in his films, and then to amend that...although women are constantly tormented, terrorized and murdered in his films, the women emerge as the most sympathetic characters and the ones with whom Hitchcock seems to most deeply identify. The whole thing is turned on its head, and the films become about male oppression, rather than about the terrorization of women. I think the best of Hitchcock films continue to fascinate me because he's obviously right inside them, he understands so well the male drive to dominate, harass, control and at the same time he identifies strongly with the woman's position. The struggle against that, his films are a kind of battleground between these two positions.

DW: Hawks, you said...

RW: I don't think my view of Hawks has changed fundamentally. I love his films as much as I ever did. I would reevaluate some of them. I think I like *Red River* [1948] less than I did. I think I like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* [1953] more than I did. It's terrific.

Hawks never receives credit, but *The Big Sky* [1952] is just about the first film in which a white man and an Indian woman end up together, and alive. And nobody noticed. Because Hawks treats it in a completely unshocking, unproblematic way. He never says he is making a great statement, or a protest against racial discrimination. Nothing like that at all. It's the most natural thing in the world.

DW: How do you find teaching?

RW: It varies. Some of the students see themselves as much too sophisticated and knowing for the films of the past. They know better now. I show them a film like *Letter from an Unknown Woman* [Max Ophuls, 1948], and they say, "Well, this is a terrible film because we wouldn't behave like that nowadays. It just shows a woman who's making herself into a victim. It's terrible to make a film like that." No sense of the social analysis in that film. The position of women, the position of men, what options are available, nothing of that at all. They think that all problems are solved. "Of course, we're not feminists. We don't have to be, we're liberated."

First of all, many of them are so damned satisfied with the way the world is at present, I can't understand it. The films they see are Hollywood action films. Not all students, obviously, but I get it a lot. You get people coming up to you at the end of the class who say, "Are we going to see a lot of films in black and white? I don't watch black and white films."

JL: We wrote about *Titanic*, and the mail was astonishing. We tried to understand why so many people were attracted to that film.

RW: It's such an old-fashioned film. Take away all the spectacle and everything and what you've got is a simple little 30s Hollywood story.

JL: Too simple. A mediocre film.

DW: There must be occasions when you reached students.

RW: A minority, I'm afraid.

DW: Did *Letter from an Unknown Woman* strike a chord with certain people?

RW: Yes.

DW: That was the film, incidentally, that Terence Davies mentioned in relation to *The House of Mirth*.

RW: Was it really?

DW: Turning for a moment to the social situation, what changes have you observed in this city? It strikes me as considerably grimmer.

RW: I've watched it deteriorate.

DW: The social polarization...

RW: As under Thatcher in England, and under Reagan and Bush in the US. Nothing has been done to arrest the process.

JL: The process has accelerated under Clinton.

RW: The old story, the rich are much richer, the poor are much poorer. There's far more homelessness, there are far more beggars on the street. The population of Ontario, unfortunately, has seemed by and large ready to fall for anything. The current Tory government explicitly models itself on the States and on Thatcher. Our present premier got in by promising a tax cut. My tax cut was just about enough to buy a pint of British beer. I give away far more money on the street than I ever did before. I know it won't help, but I feel relatively well off. They've cut education drastically, medical care, hospitals have been closed. There are endless stories about people dying because the ambulance got turned down by six different emergency rooms. Ambulances driving all over the province looking for somewhere to take this chronically sick person in. Women's centers have had their funding removed, rape crisis centers also. Women's shelters.

It's a government absolutely by the people, of the rich and for the rich. The people are being governed, but it's by the rich and for the rich. The tax cuts mean something for the billionaires. The corporations are serviced.

We now have a new party in Canada, the Alliance Party, under a wonderfully charismatic leader, Stockwell Day, who's handsome and has terrific energy and drive, he drives up in a speedboat. He is anti-abortion, anti-gay, he has a very strong Evangelical background, which is promoted no end. He wants to bring back religion, morality...

DW: Joseph Lieberman has been going on about these issues recently.

RW: I didn't know anything about Lieberman, and when I saw the headline in the paper, the first Jewish running-mate, I thought, "How wonderful." Then I discovered he was Orthodox and brought all this religious baggage with him. Terrifying.

DW: I liked your comments about [German film director] Leni Riefenstahl. I'm tired of hearing how her beautiful her films are.

RW: What's so dreadful is that she's compared to [Sergei] Eisenstein, because they both use a lot of editing. Nobody asks what the editing is doing, what it's for.

DW: You said that everyone in Ontario fell for the Tory line, but the fact of the matter is that the NDP government, with its right-wing policies, opened the door for the Tories. What were people to do? There were three rotten, discredited parties. There's a deep disaffection everywhere, a weakening of traditional allegiances, more than anything else. There isn't a single politician in the US who has a mass base. I do believe that the critical experiences can be assimilated.

RW: I hope so. I've been so disappointed with the NDP. I was a supporter from the time I came here. The only party that was possible.

DW: I don't see any difference between these parties today.

RW: No.

DW: There are difficulties. The idea of an alternative has been weakened. History causes us difficulties, but not arbitrarily. There are processes at work that will make something quite different possible.

RW: I'd love to live to see it. A great deal has got to be done, I think, to

revive socialism and socialist principles. And to make it clear that this is not synonymous with Stalinism. In the popular mind at present socialism and communism are identified with Stalinism. They're synonyms. At best, you'll get the view that "Socialism had great ideals, but look what it leads to, it must lead to that." I don't know how you turn that around. Socialism is a dirty word.

DW: Some of the complex lessons of the twentieth century have to be assimilated by a significant layer of the population.

RW: I think it's crucial as well to find ways to break through to young people. There's so much dissatisfaction, rebellion. It takes a totally incoherent form at present. Raves and drugs, anything shocking, against what they take to be the establishment. The possibility is there; so much potential.

DW: The cultural questions are so important. The rejuvenation of a socialist-political culture, which was so damaged by Stalinism, physically and morally, is absolutely critical. I have confidence that it can be done.

RW: Again, I hope you're right. I think it's a positive sign that people are communicating on the Internet. I try to be a radical in political and social ways, but I'm a terrible conservative when it comes to technology. I'm terrified of computers. I do my writing on a computer, but that's as far as I've gotten. But I'm getting hooked up to the Internet soon.



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