Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan by Robin Wood

Robin Wood's Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan is a brilliant and infuriating work of criticism. I'm sure the infuriating parts are deliberate. Wood takes films seriously, and with his considerable interpretative skills raises film criticism to a fine art.

What sets Wood apart from many contemporary theorists is his willingness to move beyond a classic textual analysis and to engage in bold interpretations. Using strong language and challenging, at times idiosyncratic ideas, Wood also does a lot to shake the cobwebs from contemporary film theory. His belief for instance that "a homosexual subtext" appears consistently in many films of the 1960s throws open the door to radical revelations.

Wood's critical focus throughout these essays centers on what he calls the "incoherent text." These are films that "have a discernable intelligence... yet work in them and...exhibit a high degree of involvement on the part of their makers [yet ultimately, they are works that do not know what they want to say]."

The interest in the incoherent text is not new. Beginning with Cahiers du Cinema's influential 1969 article, "Cinema and Ideology: Criticism," but looking back to Marx's comments on Balzac and Lenin on Tolstoy, critics on the Left have debated the merits of works that seem to belong in an ambiguous manner within the dominant ideology. Wood broadens this stream of criticism by looking well beyond the prestige productions in order to investigate some of the more obscure films of our era. Where the Cahiers editors worked on Ford's Young Mr. Lincoln, Wood turns to such B films as Women's Day of the Dead.

The most challenging sections of the book take on horror films of the 1970s: the sexual politics of Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull and Michael Cimino's Deer Hunter; and the reputation of three films rather disliked by the left: Cruising, Taxi Driver and Looking for Mr. Goodbar. In a remarkable chapter which attempts to turn the critical tide on these films, Wood states that although they may not be great works, they're certainly provocative. Their incoherence proves that the issues and conflicts they dramatize can no longer appear to be resolvable within the...dominant ideology." They testify eloquently, he believes, "to the logical necessity for radicalism."

Wood's historical chronology of the crisis in U.S. ideology will probably ring true to most readers of Borderlines, but he argues its contours in a particularly forceful manner. The early-sixties breakdown of classical Hollywood, running parallel to the general crisis in U.S. hegemony, culminated in the mid-seventies with a number of fascinating films that dramatized the unsolvable tensions of this crisis. It's A Love, argues Wood with his usual passionate language, "shows that it is no longer possible to view normality itself as other than monstrous"; Scorsese analyzes "the ways in which women are oppressed within patriarchal society on two levels"; and Heaven's Gates, a box-office disaster, "is...among the supreme achievements of the Hollywood cinema."

Wood has a great love for popular cinema. He takes it seriously and knows the conventions inside out. But he's no populist cultist and he could never be mistaken for John Harkness. In the one chapter of the book not engaged in a defense of specific, overlooked films, Wood systematically attacks the "all-too-coherent" cinema of Regranite entertainment. His discussion of Star Wars, E.T., Ordinary People and the screen characters of Debra Winger examines themes centered on "childlessness," indicating the urge to evade responsibility by both audience and filmmakers; "special effects" in which the entertainments of late capitalism became more lavish; and "the resurrection of the Father," whereby the father should be understood symbolically as the law and literally as white, male and heterosexual—the "guarantor of the perpetuation of the nuclear family and social stability."

For Wood "reassurance is the keynote" in these films, and what seems most troubling is that the West's crisis in ideological confidence which occurred in the seventies has not been resolved, but merely forgotten.

The most radical and sustained theme running through the book stems from Wood's belief that all human beings are inherently bisexual; that this nature has been massively repressed under capitalism and patriarchy; and that a "homosexual subtext" appears consistently in many crucial films of the 1960s. His analysis of Scorsese's Raging Bull and King of Comedy demonstrates the validity of considering these concepts seriously. That Scorsese also glimpses, though not quite endorses, these ideas, certainly gives the films considerable distinction.

Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan stakes out a clear and clearly unorthodox position on the left, and it is particularly refreshing for a writer to combine sophisticated prose with a frank description of his political orientations and beliefs. Yet Wood's interpretations often seem curiously divorced from currents of debate within the progressive movement he supports—critical debates among other anti-racists, left and feminist writers. At times Wood senses this and tries to anticipate difficulties that readers might have with his interpretations. For example, he acknowledges violence against women in the horror films, violence against gays in Cruising, and anti-Aryan racism in The Deer Hunter. Nevertheless his mention of these "deadly" contexts remains unevenly integrated into his analysis.

Exciting and glossing over the pervasive racism in The Deer Hunter with arguments about realism versus realistic effect strikes me as a refusal to acknowledge the social context of the film. Further, his statement that radicals didn't have problems with The Deer Hunter (only liberals did) reveals an ignorance, for example, of the superb critique by B. Ruby Rich in Jump Cut and the grilling that Robert DeNiro was subjected to when he attended the 1985 Havana Film Festival.

Readers should judge for themselves Wood's success in turning critical opinion on Cruising, Silencers and The Deer Hunter, but at the expense of the "correct" reading of a film misses the purpose of criticism, and is not his aim. Good criticism encourages active and critical viewing and Wood certainly succeeds with that.

Robin Wood has written a major work of criticism—serious, political, entertaining.
partial detachment from the general currents of progressive opinion provides the basis for both the strengths and weaknesses of his analysis but, any thoughtful reader will profit immensely. For my part I'd now agree that Down of the Dead is an important work, but he'll never convince me about Last House on the Left and The Deer Hunter.

Peter Saven works in film and video distribution at DIEC in Toronto. He is the editor of Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter Cinema, Between the Lines Press, and is currently producing a video on new refugees to Canada.

NeWest Plays by Women
Eds. Diane Bessai and Don Kerr

The events which structure women's lives do not justify optimism. Women are still attuned for their guilt, still making compromises and rationalizations. This is the unintentional message of four plays by women from Western Canada published recently in a collection—the first of its kind—by NeWest Press. In her introduction Diane Bessai notes that all the plays are “in some manner regional,” although only one of the playwrights still lives in the West, and only two of the plays were originally produced in Western theaters. Their regionalism, rather than a sense of place, is a common mindset; unfortunately, what these plays share is their translation of the experience of marginalization, most usually the manifold marginalization of women, into hopelessness, hopelessness, and acceptance. Clas-sism, ethnocentrism, and sexism, which on some level inform all of these sometimes funny (although never comic), sometimes tragic plays by women, are made to seem inevitable and even excusable patriarchal ideologies which women cannot step outside of or get past, even in their fictons, and hence imaginations.

Joanne M. Glass' Play Memory is a historical play set in Saskatchewan nearly 40 years ago. As the title suggests, the events are narrated retrospectively by Josie, the daughter of a prairie salesman who, after being fired from his job, becomes an alcoholic and destroys both his own life and the life of his family. Jean's tale is a coming to terms with the physically and emotionally damaging behavior of the father and an attempt to recuperate and justify her tragic past in a way that makes it understandable and palatable to herself, if not to the audience. "You're an illiterate girl, German-descended country bumpkin!" Cam belleows at his wife in a drunken passion. She replies, "And you're a worldly, Scots-descended, whirky-yodeller son-of-a-bitch!" The father's ethnocentric assault upon his wife is just one expression of his belief in the cultural superiority of a white male Anglo heritage. The play, of course, critiques this attitude, as in the wife's bitter retort, and yet its vision of the world remains predominantly that of the father. This is not a play about the marginal peasant woman immigrant but a romanticization of the fallen "Canadian aristocrat."

Cam too is a pawn and a victim. He begins as a good capitalist, successful, motivated and convinced of the worth of his profession, but ends a sacrificial lamb. His job is with the regional offices of a centrally controlled Canadian firm which ousts him from his position and forces him to an unemployed alcoholic. His hard drinking, which gives him the bravado and arrogance necessary to do the job, when he is out of work is an addiction which destroys him, rather than fights the abasements of corporate politics he retreats and disposes of himself.

The "briny" sexism that dominates Cam's relationship to his wife and daughter in his absence, turns to verbal and physical abuse in failure. His wife and daughter, although critical of his self-destruction and the treatment he affords them, are unable to escape. The liberation which finally comes to them is attributed, in Jean's memory, to the nobility of the father: in allowing them to leave, he has given them their freedom. In this way the last act of patriarchal destructiveness is rewritten as "the most admirable thing he did in his life." There is an oppressive fatalism in all this: not only in the depiction of women as unable to take action and the power of the past to contain our lives, but especially in the romanticization of the father as an agent of that oppression, a romanticization perpetuated and penetrated by his victim.

Fatality is also a key note in Wendy Lill's The Occupation of Heather Rose. This comes as quite a surprise in view of her previous political works on Winnipeg garment workers and women's suffrage. Unlike Joanne Glass, who sentimentalizes oppression, Lill's black humour is instrumental in making the audience aware of the suffering and oppression that white incompetence and malice cause Native society.

The Occupation of Heather Rose is a solo piece: rather than the depiction of women in the shadows of dominating men, there is a woman alone on the stage. However, Heather Rose, a young nurse, is weak and dependent upon the patriarchal order. She comes from Ontario to Northern Canada as an agent of the control state with virtually no understanding of the Native society in which she suddenly finds herself. Her social work approach to the problems she encounters (she tries to set up fitness and nutrition classes) makes an absurdity of any form of effective action and the ineffectual translation of the female role as mother/sister/caretaker into the professional sphere makes a mockery of woman's traditional work.

Heather's helplessness and horror reach a climax as she watches Naomi, a young Native woman, die from suffocating gas. Heather survives this experience by running away, an option which we assume was never available to Naomi. And although the pain of the experience has undoubtedly taken its toll upon her, Heather's summer camp attitude to her placement in the North, in a luxuriously furnished pink townhouse, her evenings spent in a bubble bath, abandoned gossip or Chatelaine magazine, her dreams of a future trip to Europe—all make it impossible to read her confession, "It's inside me now," as more than another sentimentalization, this time of literal guilt.

Pamela Boyd's Inside Out is also a solo piece but this time focuses upon the mother in the domestic setting. This play is paradigmatic of women's continuing oppression and exploitation in the home for the sake of a husband who enjoys the excitement and diversity of a public life. It traces the tensions and problems in the choice between a woman's role as mother and her desire to realize herself in a profession outside of the home. Unlike the other plays in the collection this one takes place in Toronto. However, the domestic one to the public as the privileges are to central Canada, an isolated and marginalized space.

The humour in the depiction of a day when everything goes wrong, which is unquestionably the charm of this play, is also a kind of patience, the patience of the routine, the constancy of the day-to-day, the smug satisfaction that one can work through with grace and ease, with a sentimentation that has never been tasted.

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