



Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan
by Robin Wood

New York: Columbia University Press,
1986, 328 pp.

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 close textual analysis and to engage in bold interpretations. Using strong language and challenging, if 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 1980s throws open the door to radical reevaluations.

Wood's critical focus throughout these essays centres on what he calls the "incoherent text." These are films that "have a discernable intelligence...at 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/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 despised films of our era. Where the *Cahiers* editors worked on Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*, Wood turns to such B films as Romero'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 three 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 even 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 *Border/Lines*, 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 unresolvable tensions of this crisis. *It's Alive*, argues Wood with his usual passionate language, "shows that it is no longer possible to view normality itself as other than monstrous"; *Sisters* analyzes "the ways in which women are oppressed within patriarchal society on two levels"; and *Heaven's Gate*, 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 popular 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 Reaganite entertainment. His discussion of *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, *Ordinary People* and the screen characters of Debra Winger examines themes centred on "childishness", indicating the urge to evade responsibility in both audience and filmmakers; "special effects" in which the entertainments of late capitalism become more luxurious; and a "restoration of the Father," whereby the father should be understood symbolically as the law and literally as white, male and heterosexual—the "guarantee 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 books stems from Wood's belief that all human beings are innately bisexual; that this nature has been massively repressed under capi-

talism and patriarchy; and that a "homosexual subtext" appears consistently in many crucial films of the 1980s. 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, those 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 distant from currents of debate within the progressive movements he supports—critical debates among other anti-racism, 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-Asian racism in *The Deer Hunter*. Nevertheless his mention of these "deadly" contexts remains unevenly integrated into his analysis.

Excusing 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 subject to when he attended the 1985 Havana Festival.

Readers should judge for themselves Wood's success at turning critical opinion on *Cruising*, *Sisters* and *The Deer Hunter*, but of course 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. His



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 *Dawn of the Dead* is an important work, but he'll never convince me about *Last House on the Left* and *The Deer Hunter*.

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NeWest Plays by Women

Eds. Diane Bessai and Don Kerr

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The events which structure women's lives do not justify optimism. Women are still atoning for their guilt, still making compromises and rationalizations. This is the unintentional message of four plays by women from Western Canada published recently as 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 theatres. Their regionalism, rather than a sense of place, is a common mind set: unfortunately, what these plays share is their translation of the experience of marginalization, most acutely the manifold marginalization of women, into helplessness, hopelessness, and acceptance. Classism, 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 fictions, and hence imaginations.

Joanna M. Glass' *Play Memory* is a historical play set in Saskatoon nearly 40 years ago. As the title suggests, the events are narrated retrospectively by Jean, 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 behaviour 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, peasant, German-descended country bumpkin!” Cam bellows at his wife in a drunken passion. She replies, “And you're a wordy, Scots-descended, whiskey-sodden son-of-a-bitch!” The father's ethnocratic expression of 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 office of a centrally controlled Canadian firm which ousts him from his position and leaves him 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 disarms him: rather than fighting the arbitrariness of company politics he retreats and disposes of himself.

The “benign” sexism that dominates Cam's relationship to his wife and daughter in success, turns to verbal and physical abuse in failure. His wife and daughter, although agents 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'd done 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 perpetrated by his victim.

Fatalism 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 Joanna Glass, who sentimentalizes oppression, Lill's black humour is instrumental in making the audience aware of the suffering and oppression that white incompetence and naivety 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 central 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/nurse/caretaker into the professional sphere makes a mockery of women's traditional work.

Heather's helplessness and horror reach a climax as she watches Naomi, a young Native woman, die from sniffing gasoline. 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 liberal guilt.

Pamela Boyd's *Inside Out* is also a solo piece but this time focuses upon the mother in the domestic sphere. 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 is to the public as the prairies 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... dramatic level the pain... And yet her domestic prison is... her domestic prison is... that she fantasizes... subsequent guilt over... sity for self sacrifice... with a sentimentaliza... restrictions which her... her—to her son she... God”—and in this way... itulates to the very id... insidiously oppressed

Like *Play Memory*... *Six Cadenza* is dom... conception of the wor... under which men liv... They labour long hou... die from a sudden... deterioration. For mos... options. Johnny, the o... who refuses his fate... East, takes up with M... lives of the women ar... more subservient. Lea... who is murdered bec... father/lover; Dolly is... and with his death... happily-ever-after ro... Farley, the only wom... opinion of her own, co... the men and has no... advocate of the temp... “thin old mangy cat... farcical, nagging, dis... tent.

In the face of the... fabricate multiple ev... the miners are alcoh