

# Interview with Robin Wood

Edited by Lester D. Friedman

*Robin Wood is a widely read British critic and the author of books on Bergman and Hitchcock. He is a frequent contributor to Sight and Sound and Film Comment. Mr. Wood teaches film at Warwick University in England.*

*FC: In your recent article in Film Comment, you spoke about the fallacy of thinking art could be objectively criticized. You have opted, of course, for a more personal position on the films you critique. Peter Watkins was here about two weeks ago and said many film critics use the idea of film aesthetics to avoid taking a personal position on film. Would you agree with this?*

RW: Yes, I would agree. I think this is a very widespread tendency. My point is that one can't write anything that doesn't have, somewhere behind it, a personal and an ideological position, a place in society as well as a particular individual psychology. Critics who claim to have this objectivity, who say they are telling you what this film is like and whether it's good or not, have behind them dominant ideological assumptions they aren't aware of, assumptions people generally aren't aware of; they are simply reinforcing the status quo. Consequently, it seems to me very important that a critic should foreground any personal elements in his writings, the personal commitments in his work, along with any conscious sense he has of his position. If these are kept hidden, it is much harder to attack or disagree with them. If they are put out front, they can immediately be argued with and a reader has a kind of freedom to take or leave them.

I hope, in fact, my work has become less personal in recent years. The personal elements have been more foregrounded, made more explicit. At the same time I have tried—and am still trying very hard—to play some kind of part in a social process, as against the sort of critic who imagines himself existing in one vacuum and looking at a work of art existing in another vacuum. He is saying, "I—the immortal critic—am going to give this immortal judgment on this immortal work of art." That's a very personal thing to do, although it is never admitted as such by the person.

*FC: In criticising your article, Andrew Sarris pointed out you get too close to what is going on in the street as opposed to what's going on in the cinema. How do you feel about this charge?*

*RW: I find it a fairly meaningless opposition. I don't want to make any clear distinction between what's going on the screen and what's going on in the streets. He also suggested that my present position was going to make my work much more narrow. I think exactly the opposite is true. I hope that might be demonstrated by the article I have just had published on *Blonde Venus*, which I'm pleased with at the present time. I'm not usually pleased with things I have written, but I'm pleased with that, having reread it the other day when my copy of *Film Comment* arrived. Six months from now I'll probably hate it. But I don't think it shows any signs of increasing narrowness. Quite the opposite, it shows in a much greater sense, I hope, the way in which a film exists in society and can be used within some kind of social development: development of attitudes, development of ideas.*

*FC: I am interested in how you go about preparing your articles. How much background research do you do before you see the film or after you see it?*

*RW: In terms of systematic research, I do very little. Almost everything I write grows out of lectures; it starts as lectures, almost without exceptions. These are lectures developed and refined over a period of years. I tend never to lecture on the same film in quite the same way. I hate lecturers who have a lecture course which they repeat year after year. They get so stale, so boring. The article on *Blonde Venus*, for instance. I didn't know the film at all well until I had it at York University this year. I screened it for myself three times and got so excited by it that I basically developed the ideas for the article in a lecture to the students and immediately wanted to write it out. What was behind that, in the background, was simply my previous knowledge of von Sternberg's work. I knew his other films quite well, and I did look up all the references to the film in his autobiography. That's about all the research I did.*

*FC: So then it's pretty much a matter of prior experience.*

*RW: Prior experiences and usually a rather long period of gestation and meditation. Also, the testing of ideas through lectures and through student responses and discussion is important.*

*FC: Was it the same with your earlier writings?*

*RW: Then it was a bit different because I had no opportunity to teach film. When I wrote my first books I was teaching English literature in high school. The books were written in the evenings and the weekends, and I think there was much less give and take going on. There's much less sense that the work has been to some extent refined through being worked over in this way. Perhaps I can put in there that, although I don't particularly want to disown my earlier work completely, I think the attitudes behind it I would now regard as extremely conservative and reactionary.*

FC: *How well does one have to know the director to criticize his work?*

RW: If you mean know the director personally, then I can't see that's necessary at all. If you mean having awareness of the director's other work and, therefore, a knowledge of some of the recurrent kinds of techniques in his films, then I think that is important as one thing that feeds into understanding films.

What I want very much to do now in my work is remove myself further from the sense of the film as the product of a single, individual artist and see it much more as the product of a whole culture, with a given individual artist at the center of the operation. It's a kind of very qualified *auteur* theory, rather than simply talking about a film in terms of all the recognizable directorial traits in it.

In the case of a director like Bergman, who often uses certain signs in his films which he used before, it is obviously necessary to know what they mean to Bergman and to be aware of their presence in his other films. Bergman obviously makes films for people who have seen his other films in a way, for instance, in which Hawks or Ford would never have done. He expects a conscious audience familiar with his previous work and, therefore, feels free at times to use a kind of private code. I might say that my book on Bergman is the work that now embarrasses me most.

FC: *In light of the structural and semiological approaches to film what are the specific tools in both these areas you find most valuable for the film critic?*

RW: What I have taken from the semiological movement, primarily, has been an awareness of ideology as against personal art, as well as the existence of a film as a cultural product rather than simply the work of an individual artist. Semiology is after all very much concerned with interpreting works as a system of culturally determined signs.

FC: *But you still wouldn't take the personal aspect away from films?*

RW: No. It seems to me the more intelligent semiological criticism doesn't either. It sometimes pretends to but it doesn't really. Basically the difference would be between looking at a given film, say *Psycho*, purely as the work of Alfred Hitchcock and discussing it in terms of Hitchcock's recurrent themes through his work and in terms of Hitchcock's style and, on the other hand, seeing *Psycho* as a particular product of American culture around 1960, one in which Hitchcock, Hitchcock's style, and Hitchcock's thematic concerns are important determining factors.

I think it helps to take works of art out of the museum and put them back into the culture that produced them, so that they cease to be isolated works floating about in a void. They then become works from which we can develop an understanding of the culture in which we live and the ideological assumptions that underlie that culture.

FC: *Other critics are noted as "sociological" critics, particularly Vernon Young and Colin MacArthur. How do you see yourself in view of those two?*

RW: I don't know Vernon Young's work at all, so I can't comment. Colin is an old friend of mine, and we get on very well both personally and professionally. I think we feel that we have now quite a lot in common, much more than we used to have. Colin is a committed Marxist and, as yet, I'm not. I still don't know what I am politically. I don't have a defined political position.

But I'm very attracted to certain aspects of Marxism. I applaud the whole Marxist assault on what is generally summed up as bourgeois ideology. I haven't read Marx, I might add, and I haven't even read the leading Marxist followers. I know I am politically very naive and extremely vulnerable on that score. At present, insofar as I relate to Marxism, it's in sort of a negative way. I am very interested in the Marxist attack on everything that Marxism attacks. I am less happy with accepting Marxism as an alternative, except of course that Marxism is far from monolithic. There are so many versions of Marxism right now. Several people have told me that I'm a Marxist without knowing it, that I'm much more genuine a Marxist than the people who write for *Screen*. I don't believe that myself, and I think it is probably a bourgeois sentimentalization of Marxism; also it's probably nice people trying to cheer me up in my confusion. But I don't think that Marxism in terms of films should be solely represented by *Screen*. A lot of people who also call themselves Marxists want to distance themselves from and are very critical of *Screen*.

*FC: What do you think are the connections between film theory and film criticism?*

RW: I don't think the two should ever be divorced, certainly from the point of view of any serious criticism as opposed to mere cinema reviewing, of journalism. I still think criticism and theory can be regarded as somewhat different disciplines and attract somewhat different temperaments. I've always, for example, had enormous problems with abstract thought. Every time I think about something, it's nearly always provoked by something concrete. I nearly always start from an actual work and, if I arrive at something theoretical, it comes from that work rather than meditating theoretically on "the cinema." That's why I see myself as a critic who's interested in theory, rather than a theoretician who is interested in criticism.

*FC: If the two are necessary, who do you think of as the best theoreticians and critics?*

RW: That is almost impossible to answer, especially in relation to theory because I don't want to suggest one theory of film has any sort of absolute truth or absolute validity. I can name my favorite film critic quite easily—Andrew Britton. He has written for *Movie* and has been the greatest influence on me in the last few years. He was my graduate student and we very quickly reversed roles as I began to study under him. He, by the way, has written an enormous article for *Movie*, originally going to be called "The Ideology of *Screen*." It is, I think, one of the most intelligent looks at all the *Screen* gods and what *Screen* has made of them and done with them. Practically an entire issue of *Movie* is devoted to it. I regard Andrew as having one of the most formidably brilliant

minds I have ever encountered. I allowed him to lecture under me at Warwick and felt completely eclipsed after a little while. But my favorite theoretician? I think it's an unanswerable question.

*FC: I wonder if you could expand a little more on your new position, your cultural sense.*

RW: To make this clear and to do this honestly, I shall have to talk in a very personal way about my own work and its relationship to my own life. I tend now to divide my own work fairly clearly into two parts, with the dividing line around 1972. My last book, *Personal Views*, represents a kind of transition. The title was written or derives from a period between 1970 and 1975, so the essays in it cross the dividing line. I think anybody familiar with my work should be able to look through *Personal Views* and arrange the essays in chronological order. It would at least be possible to deduce which were the earliest ones and which were the most recent ones.

My work up to around 1970 or 1972 very much centered on my marriage and three kids which I made absolutely the center of my life. I knew I was gay from the age of 12, yet I absolutely succumbed to the whole notion of what is normal, what is right, what is correct, how people should live, what is natural, and so on. So I never acted on being gay at all. I got married, at the age of 30, produced three children, and lived a kind of facsimile of a happy marriage. All our friends thought we were the ideal married couple because everything seemed so perfect. It was sort of half true. We were pretty happy really, surprisingly so.

My work at that time had to be rooted in that sense of reality and normality and, if you look at my books on Hitchcock, Hawks, and Bergman, you find an almost obsessive, continual reference to ideals of family, home, and marriage as the norm, the truth, the reality. The Bergman book is especially strong in this sense and particularly personal. I completely identified with Bergman at that time, the Bergman private anguish, the sense one lived in an existence about which one could do nothing and that anguish was a part of human condition; life had to be like this.

It was between '70 and '72 that all this broke down. My marriage broke up. I at last began having relationships with men. I had to restructure my whole life, from the bottom, as all my values had been grounded in this sense of what was normal, what was natural, what was true, what was real. And I very gradually, tentatively and with great fear, began to interest myself in the gay liberation movement and in the feminist movement. I think there are very, very close connections between the two. Both at their best and their most radical, they are dedicated to attacking the dominant norms in our society.

What happened in my work was a complete reversal on one level. In my recent work, I have been attacking the whole sense of normality and reality that my early work defended. I see that notion of the normal and the real that I had before as a kind of prison. To put it in the simplest form, what I had done was to confuse ideology with reality, two notions that are very hard to separate cleanly and I don't know if anybody quite can. Whether there is such a thing as reality that's free of ideology is a difficult question. What I had done was to confuse the dominant norms, the dominant ideology, the sense of life centered on

marriage, family and so on, with reality, with real truth, with absolute truth. Having stepped outside that prison, the world suddenly began to look a very different place. Particularly, I began to ask myself questions about all the married couples and families that surrounded me, and I found how unhappy, tense, and strained they all were. I began to wonder whether this institution that's supposed to be natural, good, and true was really all these things and if, perhaps, the world might be a happier place if these assumptions were somehow undermined. So I see myself now as trying more and more to understand the fundamentals of gay liberation and radical feminism: the whole challenging of patriarchy, the patriarchal family, sex roles, ideas about the normalities of sexual orientation.

In terms of looking at films, then, where previously I would try to seize on any director who appeared to be supporting these institutions and revealing the truth of the reality that I thought I believed in, I now tend to look for all the things that undermine this sense of reality, that burst reality wide open, burst open the concept of what is real, what is true. It means, on the one hand, that I see films rather differently from how I used to. It means that I am now becoming more interested in other directors than I used to be. Crucially, I think, comes von Sternberg, who naturally in my earlier period I rejected almost totally as a sort of perverse, decadent, kinky director and who now seems to me absolutely fascinating in the way in which his films undermine the whole sense of dominant norms, the whole question of what is normal and what isn't.

*FC: Are there any directors who made the transition for you?*

*RW:* There's nobody I feel I have abandoned. I have a sort of slightly different reaction to their work. I still find Hawks as fascinating as I ever did. In some ways he's more fascinating, and I continue to love the same Hawks' films I used to love. I have become much more aware now, much readier to accept, the whole system of sex pretensions and sexual ambivalences in Hawks' work, which I think I hardly treat in my book on Hawks at all.

Bergman I feel greatly distanced from now in many ways. A film like *Shame*, which I acclaimed in my book as one of the two or three unarguable masterpieces of the decade, I can hardly sit through. After the first twenty minutes, it seems a confused and rather unpleasant work, really very tedious after the first half hour because it's made to such a pre-determined thesis. It is simply a sort of thesis film. It seems to get thinner and thinner on repetition. What really bothers me about Bergman now is the whole thing that attracted me to him so much in the past, the sense of acceptance of anguish as part of the human condition. What is so striking about Bergman is his ideological innocence; he actually disclaims in his interview book that his films are structured by any ideology whatever. This is, of course, ridiculous and an impossibility. But he never seems able to look at, for example, the relationships between men and women, except in the most traditional terms. He expresses anguish at the fact that everybody's miserable. Then he ends the film with the characters, if they aren't all dead, forgiving each other in some way. The only thing they can do is to forgive each other because nothing can be changed. There is no sense that anything could be changed, no sense that society could be rethought. I now think that the

most interesting of all Bergman's films have been made since my book: what's known here as *The Passion of Anna* (which is a wrong sort of passion) and the *Touch*, which is a terribly underrated film. They are much more open films than his other works. *Cries and Whispers* is a retrograde film; it closes everything in again and makes a beautiful work about anguish.

FC: You mentioned Hawks and Bergman, but the person I'm most curious about is Arthur Penn. Has your attitude toward his work, particularly his later films, changed?

RW: I think he's a very uneven director, a director in great difficulties as far as the cinema is concerned. This comes out in the enormous gaps in his work. He'll now go for a couple of years without doing a film and will retreat to producing various sorts of safe Broadway plays like *Sly Fox*. Penn clearly would like to go on making films within the sort of mainstream of American cinema. He also wants to see himself as some kind of liberal/radical man—a sort of contradiction in terms—but somewhere on that sort of spectrum.

I think this is true of so many American directors now. The American cinema has reached a point where it can openly express a sense of general disintegration and despair, which it couldn't do in the '30s and '40s and so on. Things always had to be restored somehow at the end, the implication that things could be put right. Nowadays you get films like *Taxi Driver*, perhaps *Nightmoves*, that suggest a kind of final disintegration and despair on one level or another. Yet it's still, I think, impossible for the American cinema to begin attempting to deal with radical alternatives to society. I suppose that's because the only radical alternative that exists as a sort of elaborated theory would be a Marxist one, and that's still taboo in Hollywood. What Hollywood director has ever made a Marxist film, with the possible exception of Fritz Lang once or twice in a funny sort of negative way? *Rancho Notorious* is about as close to a Marxist movie that I have ever seen in Hollywood terms.

Penn, it seems to me, is very much caught in this kind of problem of what do you do? Unlike Peckinpah, and unlike Altman, Penn wants to be constructive. The films have a genuinely constructive impulse behind them. In *Alice's Restaurant* it's very noticeable indeed. Yet what are you ideologically permitted to construct? It's a very difficult question. I admire all his films to varying degrees. I like *Nightmoves* very much indeed; I like *Little Big Men* less every time I see it, I might add. It seems a more and more seriously flawed film. I think I like *Missouri Breaks* quite a lot. I'm not quite sure yet. But I don't think any of these are the films Penn would really like to be making. I have the feeling all the time that these are always compromises; he's looking all the time for what he really wants to do and can't find it. Perhaps it's impossible to find it, hence his retreats to Broadway.

FC: Can't find it or isn't allowed to?

RW: Well, a combination of the two perhaps. The way in which *Little Big Men* happened is quite interesting I think. He was researching for a film on the fate of the American Indian, and the original idea was to make a film on the American Indian today. It was going to be some sort

of radical statement that proved impossible to set up. In the course of research, he read the novel *Little Big Men*, so they fell back on that as the nearest that could be set up.

I also think it's a pity he keeps getting himself involved in these big productions because he's said again and again that he so much enjoyed the experience of making *Alice's Restaurant* on a low budget, with light technical facilities that were very mobile, no stars, and working in much more intimate conditions with much more freedom. He wants to make more films like that, yet he never seems to quite manage to do it. I don't know why. I don't know how hard he tries or just how dedicated he is to trying to get things set up.

*FC: Would Nicolas Roeg be in that flawed category also?*

*RW: I don't think so. I don't think Nicolas Roeg is particularly flawed, unless you see him as one great big flaw. Altman is in the same category, although I think Altman is a much less constructive man than Penn by temperament and is very much tempted to succumb to a cynicism/contempt kind of syndrome. Nashville and Buffalo Bill very much express the generalized contempt for everybody. It is another way out with the same kind of quandary.*

*FC: If film is culturally based, then criticism must be too. Therefore, do you notice any difference in criticism from Britain, Canada, and America?*

*RW: Could I first say I am underlining the personal element in my criticism in order to try to suggest how I work out from that to a social cultural position. As I said earlier, I think my criticism has become less personal rather than more personal in recent years because at last I have a conscious, cultural, social, crypto-political position and a sense of participating in a social process from that position which I didn't have before.*

I don't know that there are many very great fundamental differences in criticism. I think you get the same on both sides of the Atlantic—the same kind of spectrum from the generalists, on the one hand, who are quite unaware of having any confirmed cultural ideological position and think they're just giving objective opinions on works of art, to the absolutely committed, hardline Marxist semiologists and everything else in between. The spectrum exists in England, and it also exists in America. I can't see any great differences. It's not a thing I know a great deal about.

At least *Jump Cut* is much more accessible and likeable than *Screen*. I really have to put in a good word for *Jump Cut*. I should also say that I don't read a great deal of film criticism. I often feel very uneasy about this, that there is so much going on that I'm not fully aware of. I tend to read literature, often literary criticism, frequently art criticism. Most of my leisure time is spent listening to music rather than reading anything. I don't regard myself as a film scholar in the sense of somebody who has researched all the critical work that exists, but I do try to keep a general sense of what's going on.

*FC: What film makers working now do you find particularly interesting?*

RW: In terms of the American cinema, I have become more and more fascinated by the horror films as they evolved in the '70s. The three American directors whom I am most eagerly watching are Brian De Palma, Larry Cohen, and Tobe Hooper, all of whom I rate pretty highly. *Sisters*, *God Told Me To*, and *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* are three of my favorite films of the '70s.

Larry Cohen, I think, is one of the most interesting and one of the most intelligent and apparently most conscious contemporary American directors. I think his work is quite under-rated and unknown. *It's Alive*, *God Told Me To*, and *Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover* are three films I would stand up for very, very strongly. *Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover* is possibly the most intelligent film about American politics that I have ever seen. It makes a fascinating comparison with *All the President's Men*. One can see why *All the President's Men* was a big box office smash and the *Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover* lasted in Toronto for two weeks and vanished completely because almost nobody went to see it. It denies the audience all the nice easy satisfactions of *All the President's Men*. There are no nice, good heroes who put everything right in the end. It really analyzes American politics in terms of everything being wrong. There is no sense in which a couple of nice guys like Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford could do a bit of investigating and everything's OK again. It doesn't give the audience any nice identification figures they can feel good with, as *All the President's Men* does. It was reviewed in *Variety* with extreme hostility and disfavor. It's only been shown in New York City. It's a very sober film, very restrained, very quiet; people might find it dull. It's also very long. It lasts almost two hours, very analytical, very detached, and doesn't offer much in the way of easy kicks. I guess it isn't going to do much. His new film, the sequel to *It's Alive* called *It Lives Again*, is supposed to be released sometime in May.

I think that I should modify what I have said about *All the President's Men*, which I think I admire more than I have given the impression of doing. I was downgrading it in relation to the Cohen film which I think is more intelligent. But *All the President's Men* isn't as simple as I have made it out to be. Pakula sees *The Parallax View* and *All the President's Men* as clearcut opposites. He said so in interviews, but they aren't really. In terms of imagery and urban paranoia, there is a very strong carryover. I think it's debatable as to whether the apparent optimism of *All the President's Men* isn't very strongly undercut by *film noir* elements in the sense of tiny human being struggling in an enormous, dehumanizing, urban landscape, one that continually dwarfs them and almost obliterates them.

FC: In your lecture in London that was printed in *Film Comment*, where you talk about Hitchcock and *Shadow of a Doubt*, there seems to be a rediscovery of Hitchcock. Why was *Shadow of a Doubt* omitted from your book?

RW: It was omitted simply because the film wasn't available when I wrote the book. There was no print in England; otherwise, it would certainly have been in. I wanted to look at *Shadow of a Doubt* as a film, not simply a Hitchcock film, but a film in which certain Hollywood genres or generic patterns come together and collide.

FC: In the same article you talk about Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. I have often wondered whether most people under-rate the film's cynicism.

RW: That isn't how I respond to the film at all. I think in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Capra does convey a genuine feeling for families and family relationships in positive terms. He shows members of the family relating to each other with a genuine warmth, understanding, and affection. The ending grows out of that.

FC: Still there's another undercurrent that constantly undermines this warmth.

RW: Sure. The film is full of tensions, much more than was realized at the time. But if you place at its side *Shadow of a Doubt*, which also has a happy ending of a sort, it appears to reaffirm the status quo. The happy ending of *Shadow of a Doubt* is so transparently perfunctory and feeble, whereas the last quarter hour of *It's a Wonderful Life* is one of my great crying movies of all time. I go into floods of tears for all the grand old values that are being reaffirmed. It gets me every time I see it. It really is convincing I think on that level. There's a tremendous impulse in Capra towards that which I find very moving.

But there is the sudden incursion of the *film noir* world into the film. It's so powerful in the sense of the idyllic American small town that had been presented up to that time suddenly having this dark, dark side, all depending on one man's life. If he hadn't existed, you would have had this and that idyllic small town would be hell on earth, which carries the sense of how precarious the whole setup is. But it also suggests that the *film noir* vision is just as valid as the idyllic small town vision; they both have equal status in the film as representing different genres in Hollywood cinema: small town comedy versus *film noir*.

The American family film of the '40s that's really fascinating, above all others, is *Meet Me in St. Louis* which was, I think, greeted as one of the great celebratory films about the family and which now looks like a film about a collection of insane people in an asylum or who ought to be. People behave in a most extraordinary way throughout the film, and everybody is trapped; everybody is imprisoned; everybody is repressing everybody else. It's extraordinary how different films can look given the change of a few decades. Minnelli has always had this very sour side, unlike Capra. In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, it appeared to be suppressed, but it isn't really at all. It structures the film.

FC: How familiar are you with Leslie Fiedler's work?

RW: Not at all. I have heard about it, particularly his ideas about male relationships, but I've never read it. In the '70s, with all the male couple films, we have a kind of male couple/road film, which deserves a study in itself as a cultural phenomenon: *Easy Rider*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Scarecrow*, *The Sting*, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, *Big Fauss and Little Halsey*, *California Split*, and lots of others. *Scarecrow* is the most intelligent one.

I think the male couple movies were probably very much a response to the threat of liberated women because one of the main messages they carry is "Look, girls, we can do very well without you,

can't we? As long as we have you as occasional sex objects, that's all we need. Why do you think you're so important?" The roles of women in these films are always very interesting because they seem so marginal, so perfunctory. Almost always there's a couple of chicks picked up on the road and put down again at the next stop or whatever. Of course, they have an absolutely essential function which is to demonstrate to the audience that our heroes are not gay; otherwise, we might suspect that Elliott Gould and George Segal or Robert Redford and Paul Newman had really a little more than a friendship. So every now and then there have to be these women they pick up.

It is interesting, too, in a number of films you get the sort of suppressed, gay implications of the main relationship projected on to a minor explicitly gay character who's always presented as either unpleasant or ridiculous like *The California Split* transvestite. In *Midnight Cowboy* it's obvious, and in *Scarecrow* it's very strong with the guy in the prison. Again, it's a kind of disowning. "This isn't what the film's about; you must realize that, people."

I'm not quite sure why this sudden influx of "feminist" films in Hollywood now, and the word feminist does have to be very much in inverted commas there. I might ask if *Julia* is really a film about emancipated women or a film that's calculated to make Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave safe for bourgeois consumption. Their radicalism is kind of acknowledged in the film but very, very carefully encompassed and circumscribed. It's really anti-fascism, of course. It really isn't anything dangerous. Hostility to the Nazis is what it's really all about, and that's all over now.

FC: *I assume that as you have been to Toronto that you've seen *Outrageous*?*

RW: Yes.

FC: *I'm curious to hear how you respond to that film.*

RW: I think it's a nice film—a nice little film. My immediate reaction to it actually was that they don't make films like that any more. It seemed so pleasant and so unusual now, in an age where everybody is cutting up everybody else with saws and so on, to come across a film about nice people being kind to each other, basically, which is what *Outrageous* does. I find it a very fascile film though. It seems to have skirted all the real issues, and I think it's an awful pity that the second half sort of tails off into a series of female impersonations by Craig Russell however brilliant. It becomes a kind of one man road show in the second half. I personally welcome any film which presents a halfway positive myth of the gay world rather than to totally dismiss it for rejecting myths that most films have always conveyed.

FC: *Has this sort of changing attitude affected how you approach macho film figures—Bogart to Redford to Eastwood?*

RW: I don't know. It's a very difficult question. I haven't really thought about it, I guess. What I want at all cost to avoid is any sort of puritanical or completely purist attitude. I don't want to get stuck right

outside society in some sort of wayout position where I feel I have to reject about 90 percent of the films that are being made because that would be to deny my own responses to these films which are often very strong. So I suppose what I really want to do is to discuss with myself my own responses rather than simply to reject the films and try to shut them away from myself. I don't know if I can say more than that.

*FC: I have never read anything of yours on Nicholas Ray or Sam Fuller. Are you interested in them?*

*RW: The only thing I've written on Ray is an article on *Bigger Than Life* in *Film Comment* some years ago—quite a long time ago; it's a film I still enormously admire. I saw it a couple of weeks ago in Toronto, and it stands up magnificently. I don't know about Ray. The male relationships in his film are very often the emotional center of the film. What's most worrying about Ray's work now is the treatment of women in the films which tends to be rather conventional. I don't really know if I can back that up. The recent film I have seen by Ray, several times as I had it for my class, is *The Lusty Men* and I find the whole presentation of the Susan Hayward character a man's conception of a woman's role. The women in Ray's films are generally seen in very conventional ways. He isn't aware of feminism as any sort of problem or any kind of reality. Traditional ideas of women's roles are not really challenged in his films, I don't think. I don't know if *Johnny Guitar* is an exception to that. It may be.*

*FC: Do you see any modern trends in the way gays are being depicted in contemporary films?*

*RW: I suppose so. I think the situation is improving somewhat. *Dog Day Afternoon* I found very interesting, very interesting, from that point of view. It's the first Hollywood film to have a popular audience identification hero who turns out to be gay halfway through the film. There was an audible shock when I saw it in the London cinema. It really did create such a shock that moment when the Al Pacino character was revealed to be gay because all the audience identified with the character. You could sort of see people turning and asking each other if they had heard right. At the same time, however, that's bought at great cost. The Pacino figure has to be presented as a kind of wayout, kooky individual who doesn't have any social force whatever. The figures who represent the militant gay movement are simply brought on briefly in order to be ridiculed in one brief scene and subsequently turn against the Pacino figure. They're felt to have betrayed the hero of the film. I don't think the film has any sort of political force at all, but it's still nice to see it being made rather than not.*

*Looking for Mr. Goodbar* seems to be one of the most controversial films of the last year. I'm always getting into arguments about it because I defend the film. People keep telling me I shouldn't. It's supposed to be very anti-gay I am told because the killer at the end turns out to be gay as a sort of last step of Diane Keaton's descent into hell, her ultimate punishment. That perhaps is what general audiences take from the film, which is a pity. In fact if one thinks about that scene, the guy kills her not because he's gay but because he can't accept being

gay. She has become a challenge to his masculinity; he can't accept her, and he kills her because he can't. He's presented as yet another character in the film who can't escape the sort of image society tries to force on him, which I think is true of all the people in the film. They are all trapped to varying degrees in the images that the past forces upon them. I think it's a very interesting film.

Yet I think it's also a very confused film. The social worker is just as fucked up as everybody else, giving him that extraordinary fantasy about how his father beat his mother to death because he couldn't get it up one night which is a clear anticipation of the killing at the end. When I saw the film I had heard in advance that Diane Keaton was murdered at the end of the film. I heard that she was murdered by a gay man, and I was absolutely certain that it was going to be the social worker. It came as such a surprise to find it wasn't. I thought the whole film was being set up for that to be the surprise ending. Now what that does is to remove from the film any sense that the accepted social norms offer a valid alternative. In other words, Diane Keaton's behavior in the film, and the other characters' behavior, is not being judged against a preconceived traditional framework; the traditional framework is gone, along with about everything else, and you have a film about people who are searching, in all cases unsuccessfully, for something without any framework to guide them.

Unlike others, it seems to me perfectly plausible that Keaton takes the man home. As far as I can recall the film, she has no way of knowing that he's gay. He comes on to her as if he wants to go home with her because he wants to prove to himself that he is what society calls a man. I can't see anything implausible about that. One of the things I like very much about the film is its sense throughout that sex as pursued by the heroine, although dangerous, is also a hell of a lot of fun, very exciting, and exhilarating.

I think the film's great weakness is the special circumstances she is given, her own hereditary disease or whatever it is that convinces her she mustn't get married and have children. The film, in other words, can't quite say that perhaps some women—many women—would like to have a lot of sexual relationships. It has to say this is a special case; she is cut off from the normal state of affairs. On the other hand, I think it's a confused film as I said before. I think it keeps putting out all kinds of opposite signs like this. Through Diane Keaton's performance (I'm so glad she's in that film), it does present so much the sense of zest, enjoyment, and excitement. I think she's magnificent in that film, much better than she is in *Annie Hall*. There she's rather monotonous; she goes through her rather narrow range of comedy tricks. But in *Goodbar* she gives the film so much vivacity and life and brings such a sense of enjoyment to the whole thing.

FC: *What about A Special Day? Did you see that?*

RW: *A Special Day?* Yes, I did. I liked it very much. Again it was very nice to have a famous star accepting a part like that and the film not, I think, chickening out over it in any way, not creating him as any kind of stereotype. I think it's a limited film. It's very nice in that respect and also very nice in the way it connects gay liberation and women's liberation, which I think very few, if any, films have done. It presents the

plight of the homosexual and the plight of the entrapped housewife as parallel and shows them both as part of the same potential battle, though neither of them is in a position to fight within the framework of the film. But it does make that connection for once, which is great. But I kept wishing that Sophia Loren might be Anna Magnani. It seems such a perfect Magnani role. Loren is just too beautiful from the start. She can't look anything but conventionally beautiful, film star beautiful.

*FC: What do you consider to be the role and responsibility of the film critic?*

*RW:* Again I think I have changed very much. I think I used to see the function of the film critic and the responsibility of the film critic in very much patriarchal/elitist terms, as the person who tells all the people which films to go to, which are bad, how they ought to be interpreted. He helps them to appreciate the great works of art, and knows which works of art are great and which works of art are not great and which are less great. That again has this tendency towards a sort of museum approach. It puts works of art in enormous museums, takes them out of their cultural context, and deprives them of any real cultural force. I now have a much greater sense of the need for the critic to have first some social/cultural/political position before he has any aesthetic position. The aesthetic position should be very much tied up with one's feel of society, with one's sense of making, in however small a way, some kind of intervention in the social process.

*FC: It seems that leads simply to arguing one person's ideology against another's.*

*RW:* I think you always were, except that previously the ideology was concealed. There was a pretense that it didn't exist. But to see oneself in the old fashioned role as the person who appreciates, interprets, and evaluates the work of art is a highly ideological position—a conservative position. The ideology is concealed there as a pretense that a position like that doesn't have social and political dimensions. It has a tendency to sort of de-politicize aesthetics.

*FC: Have you ever thought that perhaps the role of the critic has not yet been manifested, that this is going to culminate in something at some point in time?*

*RW:* I don't know. I think there is a much greater sense amongst a great many critics of the need to feel part of the social process, and that seems to me a very healthy sign. It isn't just something that I've thought of. In fact, I was one of the last I think to come to it. I think criticism—film criticism at least—has come more and more to try to locate itself within culture and to see itself as participating in the whole cultural evolution. I don't know. Perhaps we don't yet know what the critic's role should be. Perhaps we're on the way to finding out. I don't know. It's a very difficult question.

*FC: When you are viewing a film, what do you perceive as the filmmaker's responsibility in terms of his cultural role?*

RW: I don't see filmmakers as having any responsibility that could be prescribed. Some filmmakers take on responsibilities, for example Godard and others, but I don't see that as a necessity at all. I think it's very good that Godard and other directors have this sense of direct responsibility. I think the responsibility though lies with critics and educators generally to try to promote awareness of what is produced rather than simply having it there. It becomes terribly dangerous when one starts to prescribe duties and responsibilities to the artist.

FC: *Basically I am referring to cases where someone uses obscure symbolism so that the film only reaches a select few.*

RW: I think it's a much wider issue than the use of obscure symbolism. I think it takes in the whole question of how films are perceived by their audiences. The sort of thing I had in mind, I don't know if this is quite what you're talking about, was the experience I had seeing *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* recently in Toronto at a cinema packed with young people, dense smell of pot in the air, bottles rolling about under the seats, everybody at least half stoned and the audience applauding and cheering every act of violence on the film, as it came. This, despite the fact that the acts of violence in the film are carried out upon figures who are representatives of the audience. So, in fact, they were cheering the destruction of themselves on the screen.

Now obviously they saw the film one way and I see it in other ways. I wasn't standing up and cheering every time Leatherface clubs another of the young people in the film to death. In a sense, perhaps, it might be very possible to argue that sociologically it is a very dangerous film and is having a terrible effect, in hardening, dehumanizing people, hardening people to violence. It may lend itself to this kind of use. But I would continue to defend it as a very remarkable film that is very rich in meanings, as well as a beautifully constructed and beautifully directed film which one gradually realizes as one sees it several times. The first time you are merely traumatized as I was. But I see the film from a point of view of somebody who has thought a lot about the evolution of the American horror film of the '70s; I immediately relate the film to a whole movement and don't just sit through it waiting for the next kick.

But it is a problem; it is a very complex issue that the experience I had with that particular audience disturbed me very much. It didn't lead me to think this film should never have been made, that this film should be banned, or something like that. It did lead me to think what is education doing about this? Answer of course, nothing. How many high school classes discuss *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* with their teachers? But these were the sort of kids that are seeing it.

What I am saying, partly, is the presence of such films is extremely important because they open up particular possibilities to study the culture we live in. Simply to say they should be banned or something like that is an extremely reactionary position I think. It simply represses things instead of looking at them. What I have advocated is looking at them.

FC: *What do you see of the social values of your criticism?*

RW: Probably just promoting awareness. I'm looking for change but awareness at least is a preferable and desirable state. People can't be trapped by myth. They need to understand myth. One needs to become aware that the way you are living is not God given and decide to move out of it. It must be a conscious decision. To become aware, at least to begin to formulate a goal for change, is to overcome ignorance.

*This interview took place on April 13, 1978, on the Syracuse University Campus. It includes questions from students and faculty members. Robin Wood's visit was funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation.*

Photo by Richard Lippe

