

THE COMMON PURSUIT OF TRUE JUDGMENT

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‘. . . the only question I would ask you is to defend this position more abstractly and to become conscious that large ethical, philosophical, and, of course, ultimately, also aesthetic *choices* are involved.’ (Rene Wellek, *The Importance of Scrutiny*, p. 23.)

‘The reader of the paper saw my point, but as I expected it wasn’t taken up in discussion. But towards the close a speaker who had shown himself notably articulate remarked, glancing back over what had been said, that I, he gathered, was a vitalist. I could only reply that I didn’t see how the word helped. I felt, in fact, nonplussed . . . No thought of any philosophy or intellectual system, of course, had been in my mind; I merely meant to evoke in my hearers a strong present sense of what they of course knew, and to insist on its crucial relevance.’ (F. R. Leavis, *English Literature in our Time and the University*, p. 53.)

Robin Wood’s detailed discussion of my article hardly sustains the moderately favourable reference he makes to me in the course of it. ‘There are hundreds of “paltry, impudent natures” producing “paltry criticism” and there are a few people like Mr. Lovell and myself who are at least trying to be serious and honest.’ (‘Ghostly Paradigm and HCF,’ *Screen*, p. 44.) My honesty can’t count for much since according to him I review books I’ve only read a part of. And I’m not sure how much my seriousness is worth in view of the way I offer ‘a glib and simplistic view’ of Leavis’s work; ‘grossly oversimplify’ what is on the screen in *The Left Handed Gun*; ‘sweep aside the complexities’ of *The Miracle Worker* in order to make it fit a formula; ‘fall into simplistic pitfalls’ in my account of Penn; both ‘inadvertently parody and characteristically garble’ Leavis’s dictum about critical exchange. If this is what seriousness and honesty amount to, God knows what paltry and impudent criticism is like.

Even if my critique was as severely limited as Robin Wood claims, I don't think he has made a useful response to the main purpose of my essay. Making a critique of his position the starting point, I wanted to make some suggestions of ways film criticism might develop and improve. The positive suggestions emerged out of the critique. Robin Wood's critique of contemporary film criticism is so limited that it allows him to make no positive suggestions.

His statement that the trouble with film criticism is the absence of film critics tells us at a simple and obvious level what he thinks the problem is. It gives no hint of how he would set about solving it. The basis for his statement is Lawrence's view that the critic must be a man of force and complexity. Such a view like all 'great men' theories of human activity leads to passivity since all that can be done is to wait around until the great men appear – or, in Robin Wood's terms, the men of force and complexity decide to devote themselves to film criticism. The only other possibility I can see is that we abandon film criticism for the moment and all start working for a Lawrentian revolution that would produce men of force and complexity in abundance.

Apart from the inadequacy of Robin Wood's perspective on criticism, I also dislike the stress it puts on personal moral qualities. I don't know what gives him the right to judge most film critics as having 'paltry and impudent' natures and to judge himself serious and honest. I don't think that seriousness and honesty are guarantees of worthwhile film criticism. On their own these qualities are limited ones which need to be supplemented by others – intelligence, for example . . .

In writing my critique of Robin's Wood's position I wanted to suggest quite another perspective for film criticism. I wanted to shift the emphasis from *the critic* to *criticism*, from personal qualities to impersonal ones, from moral qualities to intellectual ones. I wanted precisely to contest Lawrence's claim that criticism can never be a science. I wanted to argue at the very least that criticism can be a more systematic discipline than it is at present: that if it could not hope to attain the precision of the natural sciences, it could at least aim at the systematization of human studies like linguistics, sociology, anthropology: that it could develop some philosophical and aesthetic depth.

Essentially I was trying to conduct with Robin Wood, the kind of debate Rene Wellek tried to conduct with Leavis 30 years ago (the nature of which is indicated in the first quotation at the head of this article). Robin Wood reacts not in the spirit of the Leavis of 1937 who tried to answer the questions Wellek posed but in the spirit of

the Leavis of the late 1960's. The second quotation at the head of this article gives some indication of this later Leavis. When a statement of his is characterized as that of a 'vitalist' (an apt characterization I should have thought) Leavis was baffled. He felt he had said something obvious which everybody would agree with. He doesn't seem to realise that an everyday statement may reveal an intellectual system or philosophy and that the recognition of the basic position can help to clarify discussion. On the evidence of this quotation the anti-philosophical bias of the Leavis position has become more decisive.

Robin Wood shows this anti-philosophical bias very strongly. He gives no indication that he is aware of the issues I am trying to raise (even if I haven't done this very well). He states his own position as if it were a matter of obvious common sense (e.g. 'With film, the problem *is* one of quotation, whatever Mr. Lovell may say, and there is no way of evading it'). And since he regards his position in this light he can only see my attempts to criticize it as misguided and be irritated by them.

The result is that our debate hardly fulfils the Leavisian description of criticism as 'the common pursuit of true judgment'. In my rejoinder, I haven't tried to answer Robin Wood in a point by point way to prevent the exchange from simply seeming a personal squabble. I have concentrated on the points which seem to me important for film criticism.

1. *Criticism and Analysis* The point in Robin Wood's article that most sharply reveals the difference between us is his analogy between criticism and the study of the body. On one level I'm quite happy to accept the analogy. In order to study the body an analytic apparatus has been developed. This apparatus is by now so complex that it has to be broken into different areas of study like anatomy, physiology, neurology, etc. I am simply asking that film criticism at least make a start in the same direction. At present the film critic seems to be in the position of a general practitioner studying the body without the aid of anatomy, physiology or neurology or anything but his own intuition and experience. Without any general framework he is not only trying to work out how the body operates but also trying to pronounce whether the body is a 'good' one or not. Robin Wood is aware that his analogy leads in a dangerous direction. Having made it, he pulls back from its implication, saying criticism can't be a precise science because every work of art demands its own individual response. So does every body. No body is exactly like any other body but bodies have enough important features in common for them to be studied as a group. Precisely the same is true of works of art.

Let us take fiction films as our equivalent of the body. Just as bodies can be studied in terms of such common characteristics as their bone structure, blood circulation, nervous systems, etc., fiction films can be studied in terms of such common characteristics as editing devices, narrative structures, character relationships, etc. It is true that one film will have a simple narrative structure while another has a complex one. But the difference will not be so great that we can't recognize that they both employ narrative structures. It is also true that the relationship between narrative structure and editing devices will be different in one film from that in another. The result is that no one film is exactly the same as another. But we recognize the differences on the basis of their common characteristics. Throughout his article Robin Wood seems not to understand that an essential point of any human study is to produce generalizations that make it possible to study particular objects.

At another level his analogy needs to be challenged. It is not a self-evident fact that works of art should be described by a term like 'organism'. Some critics have chosen to describe them in different ways. They have used terms like 'mechanism', 'construct' or 'structure'. The choice of terms is an important one since it is usually indicative of the critic's general intellectual position.

In describing a work of art as an organism, Robin Wood indicates his choice. He is, in fact, choosing a 'vitalist' position though I doubt he is aware of this. The nature of his choice is made clear in passages like the one I quoted where he attacks *High Noon*. He makes his general judgment of the film in terms of a series of contrasting epithets. On the bad side are mental, contrivance, construction, manipulation; on the good side emotional, intuitive, inner logic, organic development, natural processes. It is not hard to derive from these contrasting epithets a position that sees human value in terms of man's relationship with nature, stresses the emotional, intuitive aspects of consciousness, is hostile to the industrial, mechanical world, and suspicious of the rational, willing aspects of consciousness. Such a position deriving from the nineteenth-century biology (hence the use of the term 'organism') needs to be defended. The need to defend it no doubt seemed less obvious in the first decades of the twentieth-century when Leavis was formulating his position and when 'vitalism' was very much part of the intellectual atmosphere through the writings of such diverse figures as Bergson, Samuel Butler, Shaw and Lawrence. Fifty years later when we have been made aware of the defects of the position there is a much stronger onus on people who accept it to defend it or at least to show some consciousness of the position they have chosen.

2. *The Place of Moral Values in Leavis's Criticism* Robin Wood

challenges my account of the place of moral values in Leavis's criticism. Certainly, by talking about 'central moral values' and 'a set of absolute values' I gave the impression of something substantial and well defined. I accept Robin Wood's insistence that Leavis offers something much looser than this. I should have more accurately referred to a moral attitude or a moral stance.

I think this moral attitude can be summed up in the terms offered by Robin Wood, 'the artists should be deeply, sensitively and intelligently involved with life'. But I don't agree that this is all that can be said about Leavis's moral attitude. While Leavis never explicitly defines what he means by being deeply, sensitively and intelligently involved with life, he does implicitly offer a definition. No attentive reader of Leavis could fail to notice certain recurrent terms like 'maturity', 'wholeness of being', 'reverence for life' or recurrent concepts like the importance of marriage. By putting these terms and concepts together we can get a fair idea of what counts for Leavis as evidence of being deeply, sensitively and intelligently involved with life.

Robin Wood's account of the way this moral attitude functions as a critical criterion shows an unawareness of the issues such a procedure raises. Either the idea of being deeply, sensitively and intelligently involved in life can be defined in which case it is acting as an absolute criterion in the way I said it was. Or it can't be defined in which case it isn't a very helpful notion since the critic can pronounce any work of art he thinks 'great' as evidence that the artist is deeply, sensitively and intelligently involved with life. In fact 'great' has become interchangeable with 'deeply, sensitively and intelligently involved with life' in a meaningless way.

In common with Leavis, Robin Wood wants to have it both ways. He tells us it is *virtually impossible* to define the terms. What force does 'virtually' have in this context? Either it is possible to define the terms or it isn't. So far as I can see Leavisian critics want to evade the issues for two reasons, one good, one bad. The good reason is that they don't want to produce a criterion that is so limited that it cannot cope with a variety of works of art. So they insist on the need for flexibility. The bad reason is that they don't want to put themselves into a position where they can be challenged on the level of their basic assumptions. By keeping their position in a very fluid state they can always reply to the critic who challenges their position that he misrepresents them.

3. *Criticism as the Establishing of Values* Robin Wood challenges my view that Leavis is only concerned with the great work of art by pointing to references to a number of lesser artists and poems in

Revaluation. If I had said that Robin Wood was only concerned with great films and he had replied that he wasn't and that if I opened his book on Hitchcock I should find that on page 22 he deals with *From Russia with Love* and on page 100 he deals with *Goldfinger* neither of which he has a very high regard for, would anybody think that such a reply gave a satisfactory indication of Robin Wood's critical position?

I hardly think so. It is quite clear that he only refers to these films in order to establish Hitchcock's absolute superiority (his greatness?). Leavis's procedure is essentially the same. It is true that he refers to lesser artists and works of art but his central concern is always to indicate what is most valuable in art. Anybody who read the introduction to *Revaluation* (as opposed to opening the book at random and looking at odd pages) would understand this.

This procedure is hardly surprising given the perspective Robin Wood tries to establish for criticism: 'Criticism must begin and end with a sense of value, whatever comes in between. If the purpose of criticism is not a discussion of values, then I don't see what it is.' The obvious method to come from such a view of criticism is the establishing of what is best and then measuring everything by it. .

'(Fielding) is important not because he leads to Jane Austen, to appreciate whose distinction is to feel that life isn't long enough to permit of one's giving much time to Fielding or any to Mr. Priestley.' (*The Great Tradition*, p. 3.) Even if I were to accept that the task of criticism is the establishing of values, I don't think the attitude expressed by Leavis in this quotation is a helpful one for an art like the cinema where critical judgments are so uncertainly based. To take the obvious example, a few years ago Hitchcock had a reputation that was close to J. B. Priestley's (a craftsman, good entertainer, etc.). Today he has a reputation that in terms of film criticism is close to that of Jane Austen's in literature. The ideal attitude for any film critic at the present time must surely be that any film-maker is worth serious consideration.

However I don't accept that the main purpose of film criticism is the making of value judgments. When Robin Wood asks what is obviously meant to be a rhetorical question, 'Do we simply grit our teeth and plunge in, shuddering, to undertake structural analyses of Basil Dearden, Ralph Thomas, Guy Hamilton and the Boulting Brothers' our differing attitudes to criticism become clear. My answer to this question is Yes. For me criticism's first task is not to establish value but to try and understand the nature of the cinema (all of the cinema) and its ways of operating. Once this has been done we *may* be able to raise questions about critical values—though there

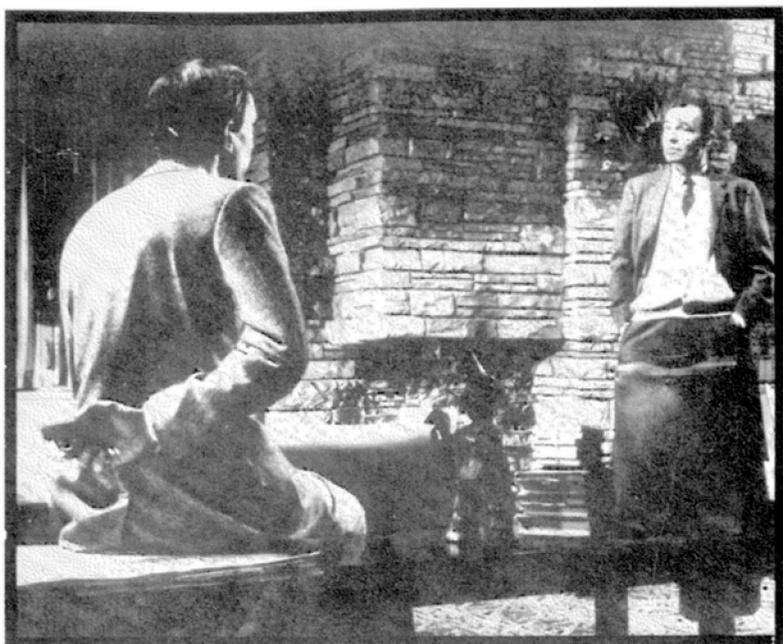
are important philosophical issues about the status of value judgments that need to be resolved before we can do this with any confidence. In the meantime I certainly think discussion of the British cinema would be more profitable if we undertook structural analyses of those directors Robin Wood so much despises. If criticism is to be worth anything it will have to do more than simply deal with a few directors who have arbitrarily been pronounced great. It will have, for example, to abandon the pseudo-psychological moralizing view that people who are amused and involved by *Goldfinger* are indulging their penchant for sadism and sexual kicks and begin to offer some explanation of the aesthetic response they are making to the film.

4. *Hitchcock and Artistic Conventions* I accused Robin Wood of not substantiating his judgments of Thornhill in *North by North West*. In his reply he seems to suggest that our disagreement cannot be resolved because of the lack of a shared, stable system of beliefs and values. I think he has missed the point of my criticism. Let me try to raise it again by making it more explicit and detailed.

The response we make to a character in any fiction depends on the basic convention of that fiction. In a novel by George Eliot we are invited to make moral judgments on the characters in a direct way: in a novel by Iris Murdoch we are invited to make moral judgments on the characters in an indirect way. This is because the convention of a George Eliot novel is one that might be called moral realism and the convention of an Iris Murdoch novel is one that might be called stylized comedy.

My argument is that the convention of *North by North West* is closer to that of an Iris Murdoch novel than it is to a George Eliot novel. Take as an example a scene Robin Wood quotes in his description of Thornhill's character when Thornhill cheats two people out of a taxi by pretending his secretary is ill. For Robin Wood this demonstrates Thornhill is irresponsible and inconsiderate of others. For me it demonstrates Thornhill's ability for quick improvisation (getting the taxi by inventing an excuse on the spur of the moment) and witty rationalization (his claim that he has made the people he cheated out of the taxi feel like Good Samaritans). I don't feel I am invited to make a moral judgment of any kind on the way he behaves in this incident.

Either reading of the incident is plausible if we look at it in the abstract. If we take into account the fact that the convention of *North by North West* is that of the comedy thriller my suggestion, I think, makes more sense. It refers to the comic element of the film in a way that Robin Wood's severe moral judgment on Thornhill doesn't. And it places Thornhill in terms of the thriller element – his ability for quick improvisation is to stand him in good stead later on



North by North West: Cary Grant in the role of Thornhill – ‘a capacity for quick improvisation’



in the film in scenes like the auction where he escapes the Vandamm gang by doing the opposite of what he has been doing up until then – calling attention to himself.

I am not principally concerned to show that my reading of *North by North West* is more illuminating than Robin Wood's. What I am trying to suggest is that in making particular judgments the critic must always bear in mind the basic convention of the film. Robin Wood implicitly recognizes this when he writes in his reply, 'Hitchcock opens the film with shots of anonymous, hurrying crowds out of which Thornhill emerges. Their function could be simply to

tell us that 'Thornhill lives in a city or that it is a rush hour.' There must be some way for the audience to recognize what kind of status Hitchcock wishes to give these shots. Or are we to regard all films which show people walking in crowds along city pavements as comments on modern urban society? I'm trying to suggest that the basic convention of a film helps us make decisions like this. Robin Wood seems to me not to be concerned with questions of this kind because he implicitly takes the basic convention of all films to be that of moral realism.

5. *Arthur Penn* It would take too much space and divert me too far from my main purposes to engage in a detailed debate about Penn's films (Can I suggest to the Editors that this debate might profitably be continued by a discussion of *Alice's Restaurant*?).

Robin Wood's comments on my account of Penn suggests he didn't have much notion of what I was trying to do. I wanted to create a framework for an exploration of Penn's work not to provide a total account of each film. I'm well aware that there is more to be said about Annie Sullivan than I said in my article. When I am tentative in my estimate of *Bonnie and Clyde* I am tentative because I realize that other things need to be taken into account (though these are not Robin Wood's 'marvellous local life' which I don't happen to find in the film).

His misunderstanding of what I was trying to do is the result of an obvious prejudice which connects any attempt to be 'scientific' or 'systematic' with results like 'schematic' or 'fitting into formulas'. This prejudice is in line with his persistent suspicion and ignorance of the nature and purpose of analytic methods.

6. *The Structure of Robin Wood's book on Hawks* Robin Wood claims that I hadn't properly read his book on Hawks. In support of this claim he says, 'Nothing I write suggests that I value *To Have and Have Not* (for example) above *Monkey Business*, *Air Force*, *Red River* or *Red Line 7000* (to take one film from each of the four succeeding chapters)'. When a critic keeps his evaluations implicit as, following Leavisian procedure, Robin Wood does, it is difficult to say precisely how he rates one film against another, unless he regards one of them as having radical and obvious weaknesses.

Let me, however, take up his challenge and compare what he says about *To Have and Have Not* and *Red River*. He doesn't explicitly say that he thinks one film is better than the other. But his discussion of *To Have and Have Not* contains general estimates like 'In fact – frivolous popular entertainment or not – *To Have and Have Not* embodies one of the most basic anti-fascist statements the cinema has given us. The sense of moral outrage at the infringement of individual liberty

expressed through Bogart's performance is, in its purity and simplicity of feeling, unanswerable: one feels behind it all of Hawks's belief in the individual need for integrity and self respect' (*Howard Hawks*, p. 26). This seems to me to be making a high claim for the film. Nowhere in his account of the film does he qualify the claim. He finds no flaws in it and he ends his account by comparing it favourably to *The Big Sleep*.

The only general estimates of *Red River* are in terms of comparisons with *Rio Bravo*: 'But it (*Red River*) lacks the concentrated density of *Rio Bravo* working in a studio with only a few actors, Hawks could encourage and organize a natural organic development from the basic material. There are two weaknesses in the construction of *Red River* . . .' (*Howard Hawks*, p. 123). The account of the film ends with 'Red River may lack the density of organization of *Rio Bravo*, but it is by no means the rambling and episodic work it may appear to the casual observer.' (*Howard Hawks*, p. 129.)

A high claim is made for *To Have and Have Not*; no qualifications are offered; no weaknesses pointed to; a favourable comparison is made between it and another of Hawks's films. The general claims for *Red River* are made in terms of two unfavourable comparisons with *Rio Bravo*; specific weaknesses are pointed to. It doesn't seem unreasonable to conclude that Robin Wood thinks *To Have and Have Not* is a better film than *Red River*.

I suppose Robin Wood might reply that despite the weaknesses in *Red River* he still thinks it as good as *To Have and Have Not* because its successes are of a high order. In which case he must, in the interest of clarity, make his judgment explicit otherwise readers will persist in coming to the wrong conclusion.

For there is other evidence to support the view that he values *To Have and Have Not* more highly than *Red River*. Compare his estimates of the other films included in the respective chapters. *To Have and Have Not* is grouped with *Only Angels have Wings* and *Rio Bravo*. *Only Angels have Wings* is described as 'a completely achieved masterpiece and a remarkably *inclusive* film, drawing together the main thematic threads of Hawks's work in a single, complex work'. (*Howard Hawks*, p. 17.) *Rio Bravo* is described in the following way: 'If I were asked to choose a film that would justify the existence of Hollywood, I think it would be *Rio Bravo*. Hawks is at his most completely personal and individual when his work is most firmly traditional . . .' (*Howard Hawks*, p. 35.)

Red River is included in a chapter with *A Girl in Every Port*, *The Big Sky* and *Come and Get It*. Some dissatisfaction is expressed with each of these films.

Again it doesn't seem unreasonable to conclude on the evidence of their context (and there being no indications to the contrary) that in terms of quality *To Have and Have Not* is associated with *Rio Bravo* and *Only Angels Have Wings*; *Red River* with *A Girl in Every Port*; *The Big Sky* and *Come and Get It*. The comparison between the two chapters that deal with these films is of some importance because it was between them that I suggested the central structure of the book could be found.

I don't see any powerful reason to change my description of the structure of the book unless it's to say that the structure is less coherent than I made it seem – clearly the high estimate Wood makes of *Air Force* is out of place within the structure I described. To put my position at its weakest, there are grounds for confusion about the structure of the book. If Robin Wood thought me to be 'a serious and honest critic' he might have tried to sort out my confusion. That he opts for the explanation that I haven't read the book doesn't seem to me evidence of somebody pursuing true judgment.

7. *Judgments about Life*. At the end of his reply Robin Wood quotes a passage from Leavis's *Lectures in America* to the effect that the judgments a literary critic is concerned with are judgments about life. I should like to quote two of Leavis's judgments about life from the same essay: 'I myself after an unaffluent and very much "engaged" academic life am not familiar with Majorca or Florence, but in those once very quiet places very much nearer Cambridge to which my wife and I used to take our children, the working class people everywhere to be met with in profusion carry transistors around with them almost invariably. The music that comes from these, like that one hears in greater volume in the neighbourhood of Bingo establishments (of which the smallest coast-hamlet has at least one – Bingo being the most pathetic of vacuum fillers) doesn't at once suggest aspirations towards Beethoven' (p. 5). And on page 20: 'Those who talk of two (cultures) and of joining them would present us impressively with the sum of two nothings: it is the void the modern world tackles with drugs, sex and alcohol,' To which a supplementary footnote says, 'And, I can now add, "student unrest" and the vote and majority status at 18.'

Are judgments like these, complacently snobbish and socially unaware, the kind of judgments about life we are to expect from a lifetime of developing the literary intelligence? If so, the sooner we develop another kind of intelligence the better.

Looking back over this article I am conscious that the positive suggestions for film criticism that I made in my first article have got rather lost from sight. The nature of Robin Wood's reply has forced

me to concentrate on restating my basic plea for a film criticism with more analytic equipment and more aesthetic and philosophic depth. I am sorry to be forced into this position because at the present time film criticism has real opportunities to develop in a positive way. A discussion has been opened up in this country that could make film criticism both rigorous and subtle. For the moment the discussion is wide ranging but incoherent, ambitious but in danger of falling over into pretension. That this should be so is hardly surprising given the diversity of the ideas present in the debate: ideas derived from structural linguistics and anthropology (structuralism and semiology), from literary criticism and art history (genre and iconography), from sociology (the relationships between art and industry, the nature of movements). If film criticism is to stop being intellectually amateur, it needs to make a sympathetic, sustained response to these ideas.

NOTE: I should apologize to readers of *Screen* for the lateness of this reply. The delay was in part due to pressure of work caused by absences in the Education Department and in part to the hope that other people would take up the issues. This hasn't happened in *Screen* unfortunately though it has in other places (see Phil Hardy's article in the *Brighton Film Review*, No. 15) and the review in *The Times Literary Supplement* (9.10.69) of Robin Wood's recent book on Ingmar Bergman.

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