

Responsibilities

of a Gay

Film Critic

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First, my title. I intend equal emphasis on all three terms: *gay film critic*. Critic: one concerned in problems of the interpretation and evaluation of art and artifacts. Film critic: one who makes the central area of that concern the cinema. Gay—not just the word and the fact it points to, but the word and fact asserted publicly: one who is conscious of belonging to one of society's oppressed minority groups, and who is ready to confront the implications of that for both his theory and his practice.

I can define what I mean here in relation to two types of gay critic who reject this equality of emphasis. First, the critic who for whatever reasons (many different ones are conceivable, of widely varying respectability) resists the public revelation of his gayness, arguing (either as defensive self-justification or as a sincerely held principle) that it has nothing to do with his view of art—the view conceived as “objective,” and art conceived as something Out There that one can be objective about. I cannot afford to be too contemptuous of this type, as I belonged to it myself until quite recently, and in my case I was always half aware that the defensive self-justification was of the flimsiest. A gay subtext is intermittently discernible running through my early work; a number of people, including some who hadn't met me, have told me that they deduced that I was gay long before I came out. But if these early writings are worth analyzing at all from the gay viewpoint, it could only be as an analysis of self-oppression—an alternating pattern of peeping out of the closet door and then quickly slamming it shut, and pasting over the chinks with placards on which words like *marriage*, *family*, *health*, and *normality* were loudly displayed—and with self-oppression becoming, as it always must, the oppression of others. (See, especially, the treatment of homosexual relations in the account of *Les Biches* in the book on Chabrol I

coauthored with Michael Walker, for the most embarrassing moments of which I must accept responsibility.)¹

The other type of gay critic places the emphasis strongly, sometimes exclusively, on *gay*, and concerns himself strictly with works that have *direct* bearing on gayness, approaching them from a political-propagandist viewpoint: do they or do they not further the gay cause? He will find it necessary to review Fassbinder's *Fox*, but will probably ignore Godard's *Tout va bien*. My choice of examples here is not arbitrary. The objection to such criticism is not merely that it is aesthetically restrictive but that it implies an inadequate, and insufficiently radical, grasp of what the gay liberation movement stands for at its best, of its more general social significance. Godard's film, in which gayness is nowhere alluded to, seems to me to have far greater positive importance for gay liberation than Fassbinder's sour determinism, with its incidental reinforcing of gay stereotypes for the bourgeois audience ("the truth about the homosexual milieu," as the English establishment critics greeted it).

Positively, I am able to point to two British colleagues who amply fulfill, in their very different ways, my conception of the gay film critic's responsibilities: Richard Dyer and Andrew Britton. The latter's article on Eisenstein in *Frame-work* strikes me as exemplary in this respect.²

The change in my critical position and practice that many people have noted—some with favor, some with dismay—has been centrally determined by my coming out, and by the changes in my personal life connected with that. Critics are not, of course, supposed to talk personally. It is regarded as an embarrassment, as bad taste, and besides it is an affront to the famous ideal of "objectivity." The typical bourgeois establishment reaction to any form of personal revelation might be typified by a remark by Philip Strick in his ignominious review of my last book in *Sight and Sound*—a review that managed to trivialize every issue in sight—where my coming out in print was described as "telling us about his love life."³ Yet I believe there will always be a close connection between critical theory, critical practice, and personal life; and it seems important that the critic should be aware of the personal bias that must inevitably affect his choice of theoretical position, and prepared to foreground it in his work.

I don't believe that any theory exists in a vacuum or as truth. Every theory is the product of the needs of particular people within a particular culture at a particular stage of its development, and can only properly be understood within its context. Our gravitation, as human individuals within, and determined by, our culture, toward one or other of the available critical positions, will depend on our personal needs, on the way we wish to lead our lives, on the sort of society we would like to build, on the particularities of our involvement in the social process.

Such a view presupposes a constantly developing, dynamic relationship between criticism and art, between individual and work. There is in a sense no such thing as "the films of Ingmar Bergman," existing as an entity that criticism could finally and definitively describe and interpret and place in the museum. Rather, the films exist as experienced and perceived by the viewer, with the precise nature of the experiencing depending on the viewer's position in society and within ideology. Our sense of the *use* of art generally, and of the particular uses to which particular works allow themselves to be put, will vary from generation to generation, shifting in accordance with our sense of personal and social needs.

What I propose to do is, first, define what gay liberation means to me, the kind of significance I attach to the movement, the kinds of social intervention I see it capable of making, and then reconsider certain films and directors (not necessarily or centrally concerned with gayness) that already meant a great deal to me before my coming out, in an attempt to indicate the nature of the shift in my critical practice, the somewhat different kinds of interest and emphasis I would now bring to an interpretation and evaluation of them.

As most commonly expressed in the newspapers, periodicals, etc., of our establishment (not to mention various gay society discussions I have attended), the aim of the gay liberation movement would appear to be read as that of gaining acceptance and equal rights for homosexuals within existing society. My basic argument is that such an aim is totally inadequate. Acceptance of the homosexual by society has its obvious corollary and condition: acceptance of society by the homosexual. To see the incongruity of this, one has only to consider the dominant ideological norms of the society within which we live. As far as love and sexuality are concerned, those norms are marriage (in the form of legalized heterosexual monogamy) and the nuclear family (with the alternative, at once complementary and incompatible, of exclusive romantic love). Between them they offer homosexuals the terms on which they might be acceptable: the aping of heterosexual marriage and family (with poodles instead of children) or *l'amour fou*, preferably culminating in suicide or alcoholism.

Of crucial importance to gay liberation is its very close, logical connection with women's liberation. The present status of both has been made possible by the increasing public acceptance of birth control, with its implicit acknowledgment that the aim of sex is not necessarily procreation, and its consequent undermining of the tyrannical and repressive norm of monogamy and family. The common logical aim of both movements must be, it seems to me, to attack and undermine the dominant ideological norms on all levels. This offers the gay critic a brief that is enormously more open and comprehensive than the examination of the ways in which homosexuals have been presented on the screen (though

that might of course become a perfectly legitimate focus of her or his attention, provided the wider implications were always kept in view). The attack, for instance, could—indeed, should—be directed at the economic structures of capitalism that support the norms, as they are embodied in the structure of the film industry itself as well as in its products. Being neither a practiced political nor a sociological thinker, I am going to restrict myself to questions of sexuality and love.

When dealing with ideology, it is always necessary to ask not only what it expresses but what it *represses*. The opposed, largely contradictory, ideological positives our culture offers (monogamy and family, romantic love) have one obvious feature in common: the insistence on exclusivity and mutual possession, with “fidelity” thought of basically in sexual terms and sexuality mystified as “sacred.” Beyond this, there is the furtive extramarital affair, with its penalties of tension, secrecy, distrust, recrimination, etc. What is repressed is the possibility that people might relate freely to each other, on a nonpairing basis, without imposing restrictions on each other’s liberty. The dominant ideology has a word for this: *promiscuity*, a term loaded with pejorative connotations. According to ideology’s double standards, there is some difference between male promiscuity and female promiscuity. A heterosexual man who is promiscuous acquires a certain glamour and is a Casanova; a woman who is promiscuous is a bitch, a tart, a slut, a whore. By and large, however, ideology has no place for promiscuity (or, as I prefer to call it, *relating freely to one another*) as an asserted lifestyle or a possible norm.

My shift in terminology is also a shift in meaning. *Promiscuity* is always exclusively sexual, and the notion of it within ideology has the function of separating sexuality from love. *Relating freely to each other*, on the other hand, involves potentially the whole person—including his or her sexuality, without which the relating wouldn’t be free, but not *restricted* to it. (This is not to denigrate the pleasure of quite casual sexual relations, or to suggest that every relationship should be “complete,” whatever that might mean.) Much the same distinction could be made if one substituted for *promiscuity* the term *permissiveness*—a term popularly understood almost entirely in sexual terms rather than in terms of free human relationships. The term has the added objectionability that it implies that someone or something (“society”) is doing the permitting; and to acknowledge society’s right to permit is to acknowledge its right to prohibit. In general, ideology’s method of dealing with the unthinkable notion of free relationships is to trivialize or dirty it, so that it becomes difficult to imagine what it might actually entail or how it might work.

In *Life against Death*, Norman O. Brown defines the central characteristic of capitalist man as dissatisfaction, with anxiety as its inevitable companion: the

desire to own more, coupled with the fear of losing what one has.⁴ Anxiety, or insecurity, certainly seems fundamental to the possessiveness that characterizes most of our sexual relationships. Parenthetically, as a person whose personal insecurity reaches proportions one might describe as grotesque, I must stress that I don't wish to appear to speak from some superior "liberated" position wherein I have solved all life's problems within my own life. On the contrary, I speak as one struggling and floundering frantically among the mess and confusion of sexual relationships as they currently exist; I am prey to all the contaminations of the jealousy, possessiveness, and exclusivity that I attack. One must, however, recognize—otherwise there could never be any progress—that ideas must always outstrip emotions. Our emotions have to be educated, and emotional education is the most painful of all processes, because the education is resisted at every point by what we call our instincts but might more reasonably think of as our ideological structuring. Only with ideas can we confront ideology.

I shall move in a while to two strongly contrasted directors with whose work I have, as a critic, been associated—Bergman and Howard Hawks—attempting to suggest ways in which their work might be reread from the perspective I have outlined.⁵ I shall not spell out in detail the differences between my approach now and my books on these two directors, as this would be deducible for those who have read them and boring for those who haven't, but I hope for the former group a critical reflection back over my past work will be implicit. First, however, I want to talk briefly about a film that, long among my favorites, has grown in meaning and in richness for me over the past year: Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*. I have come to reread the film precisely in the context I have defined: our entrapment in ideological notions of love and sexuality, with their emphasis on pairing, choice, and exclusivity; and the continuously repressed but insistent vision of the potential loveliness of genuinely shared relationships, in which none of the participants feels excluded, in which love is recognized as a life principle that transcends the exclusive romantic attachment. To anticipate, one can evoke here one of Renoir's favorite words, and the force it gets from the context of his work: *generosity*.

Two general or recurrent features of Renoir's work must be made present here. One is the notion (influenced perhaps by the childhood described in *Renoir, My Father* and the background of French Impressionism) of life as continual flux.⁶ He quotes Antoine Lavoisier's "In nature nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed" as one of his favorite texts. The other is the recurring relationship pattern in his films (at once an extension and a questioning of the "eternal triangle") of one to three—usually one woman to three men (*The Golden Coach*, *Elena et les hommes*, *Diary of a Chambermaid*, *French Can-*

Can, and *Rules of the Game* itself, where there are in fact four men if one counts St. Aubin), though in *The River* there is one man to three women. The addition of a third option crucially affects the significance of the triangle, which in our culture has always been firmly associated with exclusivity and the necessity for choice (usually, the conflict is between marriage, family, and romantic love, the opposed and complementary ideological poles). If three, why not four, five—or twenty?

The film was initially received (and is still, by some people) as virulent social satire, an attack on a decadent ruling class on the eve of its inevitable dissolution. Confronted with this view, Renoir's own response was one of amazement: "But I love those people. . . . I would love to have lived in that world."⁷ It is consistently analyzable, I think, in terms of a tension between the two impulses these responses suggest.

There's another way of looking at the film's rich ambiguity of effect: it can be read as a film about people who go too far, or as a film about people who can't quite go far enough. Many have commented on the difficulty of defining what, precisely, *are* the rules of the game. In fact, every character has his or her own rules, or a personal variation on an implied complex of rules. In only two characters do the rules appear clear-cut and rigid in their application: Schumacher (Gaston Modot) and Lisette (Paulette Goddard). One aspect of the film's astonishingly complex yet precise formal organization can be suggested by pointing to three things about them: (1) they are husband and wife; (2) the rules they enforce are the most strongly contrasted of any represented in the film, indeed diametrically opposed; and (3) it is the dual action of their application of their rules that produces the climactic catastrophe. The rules of Schumacher, the gamekeeper from Alsace (who is deliberately presented, in 1939, as an embryonic Fascist), are centered on strict and repressive notions of marital fidelity, the ownership of wife by husband, that give him the moral right to shoot both wife and lover in the event of discovered infidelity. The rules of Lisette, the Parisian ladies' maid, are centered on notions of free sexual play as long as it remains frivolous and unengaged. When it comes to seriousness, the priorities are narrowly social-ideological; Octave (Renoir) is too old for Christine (Nora Gregor), and couldn't afford to keep her in the luxury she's used to.

Between these two—with their equally defined and entrapping, if opposite, sets of rules—come the film's central characters, who all exist in states of varying uncertainty and confusion as to what the rules are. And Christine's uncertainty is significantly the most extreme. From her point of view, the ambiguity of the film can be put another way: the story of a woman trying desperately to understand what her role should be or the story of a woman who can't quite accept that all roles are traps and refuses them all—with the roles defined in terms of the

relationships available with particular men. It is important to recognize that the society Renoir depicts is inhabited almost entirely by outsiders: the marquis is Jewish, Christine is from Vienna, André Jurieu (Roland Toutain) is from the modern world of airplanes and public heroes, Octave is a perpetual outsider wherever he is. The character who seems chiefly to embody our idea of a stable aristocratic society is the general, an old man whose constant refrain is that everything is passing away.

It is a society in which all order is at a stage of potential or imminent collapse; and this can be seen in terms of either a closing down or an opening up (the film encourages both readings). "I don't want fences, and I don't want rabbits," the marquis tells Schumacher, and the remark has very clear parallels with the paradoxes of the characters' sexual behavior throughout the film. I have no knowledge of the actual domestic commitments of rabbits—their familial organization may be as impeccably bourgeois as it appears in the books of one of my favorite authors, Beatrix Potter—but in popular imagery rabbits always have connotations of promiscuity; "breeding like rabbits" doesn't refer merely to the number of offspring but to presumed sexual habits. The emphasis throughout the hunt is on the mindless slaughter of rabbits, the detailed imagery evoking the strongest sympathetic response toward what is being destroyed.

The tension I have described can be illustrated succinctly with the beautiful little scene in which, after her discovery of her husband's adulterous relationship with Geneviève (Mila Parély), Christine confronts her rival in her room and enlists her in an ambiguously motivated complicity. On the one hand, Christine's reaction to the shock (she had previously believed completely in her husband's fidelity) is to play what she takes to be "the game" by rejecting all seriousness; she wants Geneviève to keep her husband occupied, not so that she can develop her relationship with André—whom she describes at this point as "too sincere"—but so that she can play around. On the other hand, the possibility of freely shared relationships is nowhere closer to the surface of the film than in this scene, which culminates in a moment of relaxed conviviality and exchange between two women (the demonstrations of how Tyrolean dances go) of a kind very rare in the cinema, where women are habitually seen from the male viewpoint as rivals for the man, their possible uniting repressed. The whole film can be read as structured on continuously shifting couplings (I don't intend the sexual meaning here) that cut completely across all the divisions of sex, class, social role; virtually all the characters have a "duet scene" at some point in the film. The obvious exception is André and Geneviève—the two Octave suggests near the beginning that it would be most convenient to pair off.

Renoir's method and the film's visual style are crucial to its meaning. His

creative collaboration with actors—all the actors—is well known. The camera style emphasizes the structure patterns of the scenario by never allowing us more than transitory identification with one character at the expense of others. The constant reframings, in which the camera excludes some to include others, the continual entrances into and exits from the frame, the division of our attention between foreground and background—the style might be aptly described as perpetual visual promiscuity, quite breaking down the traditional one-to-one relationship of spectator to protagonist to which the cinema has habituated us. The Renoiresque principle of emotional generosity is everywhere frustrated in its free functioning by the characters' insistence on sexual pairing, and everywhere expressed and celebrated through the "promiscuity" of the camera style and the direction of actors.

Ultimately, *The Rules of the Game* is circumscribed within the ideological assumptions about pairing (Renoir never overtly questions this on a sexual level), yet it is precisely such assumptions that provoke every disaster in the film. It hovers continuously on the verge of a new acceptance. Hence the final ambiguity of effect. The film is at once an elegy to a lost society and one of the most progressive ever made. The world it creates is of the past, yet it everywhere points toward a possible future.

If I were to rewrite my early books now, the one on Bergman would certainly cause me the greatest problems, and be the one in need of the most drastic revision. When I wrote it, my sense of identification with its subject was extraordinarily intense. Beneath the apparently happy surface of a firmly traditional marriage-and-family situation, I was experiencing the sort of anguish and desperation that Bergman's films so compellingly communicate, and accepting it as unchangeable, as "the human condition." Now, it is precisely this tendency of the films to impose themselves as "the human condition" that most worries me. In a supremely revealing moment of the interview book *Bergman on Bergman*, the filmmaker asserts his innocence of any ideology, a substance by which his films are apparently completely uncontaminated.⁸ He seems to be using the term in a sense somewhat different from that in which it is usually employed in current film criticism; he means by it a *conscious* structure of social-political ideas. Yet the innocence clearly extends beyond that. There is no awareness that an ideology might exist in one's work, and centrally structure and determine it, without one's being conscious of it. The lack of an explicit social-political dimension to Bergman's work has often been noted; ten years ago I quite failed to see the force of such an objection, my own work as a critic having precisely the same lack.

Another, related way of considering the limitations of Bergman's work is via Andrew Sarris's objection that the films are repeatedly flawed by eruptions of

threatened and sometimes taking over. In both sets the concept of chaos is important, but it is quite differently defined. In the adventure films it is *out there* (the Andes mountains, the Arctic wastes, etc.) and menacing; in the comedies it is *inside*, a positive force awaiting its chance to disrupt the established order, appalling yet also exhilarating and liberating.

The role of women in Hawks's films is always problematic. In many respects they remain male fantasy figures; no one would wish to claim them for the feminist cause, despite their aliveness and independence. With very few exceptions (*Red Line 7000*, e.g.), the women are always hostile to each other, unable to unite, conceived as instant, automatic rivals for the male, as in *Only Angels Have Wings* and *To Have and Have Not*. Their great interest—apart from the intensely vivid and dynamic, if male-oriented, performances Hawks usually gets from his actresses—lies in the total absence, in the adventure films at least, of any logical role for them. The point becomes very clear if one juxtaposes them with John Ford's women, who have a very well-defined, thoroughly traditional role: they are wives and mothers, mainstay of the home, at once the motivation behind the building of civilization and the guarantee of its continuance and transmission. In Hawks there is no positively conceived civilization, no home, no marriage. Woman becomes problematic by her very presence—which in Hawks is always a very insistent presence, far removed from the little lady left waving tearfully goodbye at the start to await the hero's return at the end. Hawks's solution (always uneasy, never satisfying, but central to the vitality of the films) is to break down as far as possible the division between male and female; always, in the adventure films, by making the woman aggressive and "masculine."

Many critics have noted a gay subtext running through Hawks's work, constantly suppressed, yet always insisting on some form of ambiguous, half-grudging expression. It goes right back to the silent period. *Fig Leaves* contains a remarkable scene in which a man "acts" a woman in a mock courtship with his friend; *A Girl in Every Port* (which actually ends with the woman ousted and the male relationship reaffirmed at her expense) was the first of two films Hawks has described as "a love story between men." He has of course never acknowledged gayness in his films and would repudiate any suggestion of it; nonetheless, one might see the term *love story* as a giveaway.

There are obvious examples of male relations so close as to become at least sexually ambiguous: Thomas Mitchell's feeling for Cary Grant in *Only Angels Have Wings*, or Kirk Douglas and Dewey Martin in the other "love story between men," *The Big Sky*. There is also, from the forties on, a whole procession of young male actors, usually playing second fiddle or sidekick to the hero (but

the relationship always characterized by an underlying tension or conflict—that conflict in which, according to *Bringing Up Baby*'s psychiatrist, the love impulse expresses itself), who are fairly obvious gay icons in appearance and behavior, if not always in offscreen actuality: Montgomery Clift, Dewey Martin, Ricky Nelson, the young James Caan.

In view of this continually present, half-suppressed, sexual ambiguity in both male and female roles, the notion of chaos in Hawks—and the films' ambivalent attitudes to it—takes on a new interest. It is closely connected to one of the most striking, consistent, and peculiar features of his work: the fascination with role reversal. This takes a great variety of forms. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *The Ransom of Red Chief* (Hawks's episode in *O. Henry's Full House*), the reversal is between child and adult; in *Monkey Business* and *Hatari!* the sophisticated and the primitive change places, become reversible, the distinction blurred. Most striking here is Elsa Martinelli's initiation into the Warusha tribe, and the subsequent scene where her tribal paint is replaced with cold cream. *Hatari!* also reverses humans and animals; it opens with truck and jeep converging on a rhinoceros, and ends (almost) with baby elephants converging on a woman. Most bizarrely and puzzlingly, one has in *The Thing* the reversal of human and vegetable.

But most pervasive—and surely the crucial and explanatory instance—is the reversal, in film after film, of male and female. Existing within sexist ideology, the films never manage to assert equality: it is funny for men to dress as women, but generally attractive for women to dress as men (and they are in uniform, not drag). Yet the notion of potential reversibility is very strong. One small, intriguing point: the interchangeability of Angie Dickinson in *Rio Bravo* and James Caan in *El Dorado*. Both are conceived in terms of their relationship to John Wayne, a relationship based on both affection and antagonism; both are gamblers; both are seen doing the same bit of business with a pack of cards; both are identified partly by their idiosyncratic adornments (Dickinson by her feathers, Caan by a picturesque hat); both follow or stand by Wayne after they have been dismissed—in the long tradition of Hawks's heroines. And both have the same line of dialogue, addressed in both cases to Wayne: "I always make you mad, don't I?"

The logical end of the characterizing tendencies of Hawks's work is bisexuality: the ultimate overthrow of social order, and the essential meaning of the chaos the films both fear and celebrate. Ultimately it is always contained (Andrew Britton would say "repressed") within Hawks's classicism, which is also the classicism of presixties Hollywood. Yet it seems to me nevertheless the secret source of the oeuvre's richness, vitality, and fascination.

Notes

- 1 Robin Wood and Michael Walker, *Claude Chabrol* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 103–12.
- 2 Andrew Britton, "Sexuality and Power or the Two Others," *Framework* 6 (Autumn 1977), 7–11, 39; and "Sexuality and Power," *Framework* 7/8 (Spring 1978), 5–11.
- 3 Philip Strick, "review of Robin Wood, *Personal Views: Exploration in Film* [London: Gordon Fraser, 1976]," in *Sight and Sound* 45, no. 4 (Autumn 1976): 258.
- 4 Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959).
- 5 Robin Wood, *Ingmar Bergman* (New York: Praeger, 1969) and *Howard Hawks* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968, revised edition London: BFI, 1981).
- 6 Jean Renoir, *Renoir, My Father*, trans. Rudolph and Dorothy Weaver (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962).
- 7 Jean Renoir, "A Certain Grace," in *The Rules of the Game: A Film by Jean Renoir*, trans. John McGrath and Maureen Titelbaum (London: Lorrimer, 1970), 13.
- 8 Ingmar Bergman, *Bergman on Bergman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).
- 9 Andrew Sarris, *Village Voice* 23 March 1967, 25.