

In Memory of Bob Eberwein

Chris Holmlund, with Peter Lehman and Bill Luhr

Robert Eberwein's passing at age 82, November 23, 2022, is a tremendous loss for the many who knew and loved him – friends, neighbors, colleagues, students, his wife Jane, their two cats. He was a lovely guy, self-effacing, down-to-earth, discerning, keenly interested in others, and committed to social justice.

Bob was a steadfast SCS/SCMS member for decades. He never missed a members meeting or an awards ceremony. He attended every session he could. He met old friends and made new ones. He liked supporting younger scholars. "Bob didn't just attend, he *participated*," Peter remembered. "Typical of his professional generosity, his comments were always insightful and supportive." "Bob had a strong sense of professional responsibility," Bill added, "but he didn't have a formal or pretentious bone in his body."

Peter and Bill first met Bob at a 1977 comparative literature film conference in Bloomington, IN. They shared with him the excitement of discovering, exploring, and promoting a new discipline: film. Together they went yearly to Florida State's Literature and Film Conference. Chris met Bob later. She, too, was immediately impressed by his warmth and sincerity. We all benefited from his friendship and valued his intellect.

Bob thought of himself first and foremost as a "teacher," not a "professor." He taught literature and film at Oakland University for nearly 40 years. He was popular in part because he was as interested in learning as he was in lecturing. Always well dressed in suit and tie, hair nicely cut and side-parted, he was dignified. Yet you *knew* as soon as you heard him softly ask, "Whatcha been watching?" that he wanted to know what *you* thought, *you* cared about.

It was easy to talk with Bob because his interests were wide-ranging: he was as comfortable chatting and writing about Tina Fey as Christian Metz. His love for movies began as a kid: he would head to downtown Detroit with a friend to see films like *From Here to Eternity* before they opened at local theaters.

He excelled at historical, archival research. When he retired, in 2007, it was so that he could do more of it. He wrote clearly – even about complicated and/or controversial subjects. His first book, 1979's *A Viewer's Guide to Film Theory and Criticism* (Scarecrow), originated in his desire to make film theory understandable, hence useful to students. In his next, *Film and the Dream Screen* (Princeton, 1984), he examined films that showcase dreams and films that retroactively position their events as dreams, drawing on an eclectic mix of psychoanalytic and physiological approaches to unlock why it is that we are drawn to screens, to dreams. In his third book, *Sex Ed* (Rutgers, 1999), he explored educational films and videos dealing with venereal disease, contraception, puberty, AIDS, marriage, and sexual enhancement with an eye to weighing how media impact our experiences of health, disease, and desire.

Bob's crowning achievements are his studies of US war films. His anthology, *The War Film* (Rutgers, 2004), and two monographs, *Armed Forces: Masculinity and Sexuality in the American War Film* (Rutgers, 2007) and *The Hollywood War Film* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) are essential reading for anyone interested in the genre. The cover of *Armed Forces* – a photograph by Edward Steichen – captures the kinds of quotidian, often nonsexual relationships between men that war films so frequently depict. In Steichen's image, three exhausted sailors sleep on a ship's

deck, their bodies companionably interlocked. A fourth looks over but away from them. How to understand the scene is left to the viewer. Bob was careful not to reduce his analyses, leaving any ultimate interpretation to us. He was no champion of dichotomy or opposition – masculinity vs. femininity or heterosexuality vs. homosexuality, for example. He respected diversity – of lives and of ideas.

Those who did not know Bob will hopefully peruse his writing. You need to look no further than the acknowledgements to the “Star Decades” volume he edited, *Acting for America* (Rutgers, 2010), to sense his graciousness. In terse, pithy sentences and a single paragraph, he thanked *everyone* who somehow contributed to the project. Few words repeat, only “the,” “a,” “helpful,” and “again”: Bob knew the English language is rich. The last sentence resonates thanks to comma placement: “And Jane was, as usual, Jane.”

Something similar, we hold, was true of Bob. He was a dear, dear friend and, simply, Bob.