

In 2012, *New York Times* film critic Anthony “Tony” Scott ’87 (writing under his byline, A.O. Scott) reviewed a big Hollywood release, *The Avengers*. He praised some aspects of the movie and bemoaned others, specifically “its sacrifice of originality on the altar of blockbuster.” Scott called *The Avengers* “a snappy little dialogue comedy dressed up as something else, that something being a giant ATM for Marvel and its new studio overlords, The Walt Disney Company.”

Disney’s giant ATM worked flawlessly. The movie quickly took in more than \$1 billion in box-office receipts globally. But

after Scott’s review ran, Samuel L. Jackson, who starred in *The Avengers* as Nick Fury, tweeted that “AO Scott needs a new job! Let’s help him find one! One he can ACTUALLY do!” This kicked off an Internet brouhaha, with Jackson’s followers retweeting the salvo and even adding their own colorful suggestions as to what Scott was qualified to do with himself. It became international news before the fracas burned itself out. But it had raised issues, even timeless issues, about the place of the critic in culture.

In his 2016 book *Better Living Through Criticism*, Scott wittily recounts this dustup and explains that it surfaced well-worn objections to critics: they lack joy; they rain on everyone else’s parade; they are haters, squares, snobs, or nerds. Scott pushes back at these stereotypes and argues that criticism remains integral to the process of creation in the arts.

Certainly, over the centuries, critics have been a beleaguered lot—esteemed among small, sophisticated circles of readers, but widely disparaged, especially by those whose work they criticize. Yet critics have somehow survived the insults and objections. Today they actually occupy a crucial leverage point in the culture. Economic, social, and technological evolution have made the critic’s function more, well, critical than ever.

Scott’s book ventures far beyond cinema and deals with fundamental questions of art, audiences, and commentary. His background in literary criticism, for example, informs a close reading there of Rilke’s sonnet, “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” He extracts the poet’s view of how readers should let the power of art affect them. “You are opened up, exposed to the universe, which sends

you a message, through the ventriloquism of ancient marble and modern literature,” Scott writes, setting up a quote of the poem’s famous last line: “*You must change your life.*”

Scott’s film reviews, which have appeared in the *Times* for nearly 20 years, make an even stronger argument for the value of criticism. They offer articulate, well-reasoned, and informed viewpoints on new movies, rendered in a highly readable style. In an Internet era of random, unmediated commentary on entertainment, Scott’s essays, built on evidence and under the imprimatur of *The New York Times*, offer readers a reliably intelligent viewpoint anchored in objective data as well as opinion.

Occasionally he also produces an essay casting new light on an older work like the 1999 Matthew Broderick-Reese Witherspoon film *Election*. And not infrequently, Scott folds in humorous flour-

ishes, as in a recent review of *Yesterday*, a comedy built on a fanciful premise about the Beatles. His review straightforwardly includes numerous quotes of Beatles song titles and lyrics, all *sans* attribution but perfectly seamless in context. “She’s carrying a torch for him visible from across the universe,” he wrote of the film’s female lead, before adding, “With a love like that, you’d think he would be glad.”

“I inhale Scott’s reviews because he champions the foreign and independent movies I like,” says screenwriter Jesse Kornbluth ’68, editor of *HeadButler.com*. “But the reason I read even his re-

views of the fifth sequel of some Hollywood dreck is because he’s a hard-wired humanist who actually cares about the relationships in a movie. As a critic, he’s a writer—he matters.”

COMMENTING on a 1973 *New York Review of Books* essay, Scott notes that “Joan Didion cut down critics for not getting it—not understanding that the highest form of art in Hollywood is the deal memo. The industry’s creative output, she says, is actually products and deals. Maybe the movie didn’t get made—but ‘we had some fun along the way.’”

“Yet the paradox is that some really marvelous works of art have emerged from this capitalistic, cutthroat, greedy system,” he continues. “One reason movies are so interesting to write about is the possibility of art and the attempt to make art. Movies require enor-

THE WAY OF THE CRITIC

A.O. Scott on watching and reviewing a *lot* of movies

by CRAIG LAMBERT



SPECIAL THANKS TO THE QUAD CINEMA, 34 WEST 13TH ST., NEW YORK, NEW YORK



mous outlays of capital up front. A poem or a painting does not. And in film, the creative people are not using their own money.”

The saying has it that a painter needs a palette, a composer needs a piano, but a filmmaker needs an army. The cost of making a studio feature is indeed exorbitant. In 2017 the *Hollywood Reporter* pegged the average production budget at between \$70 million and \$90 million, but the studios’ bigger bets typically came in at \$200 million to \$300 million. These giant outlays certainly shape how studios and creators see film critics: as people of great power who can have a profound effect on how their immense investment fares in the marketplace.

“Movie studios are trying to market these things and create media circumstances that get people to see them,” Scott explains. “Critics can throw a certain amount of cold water on this, and they aren’t controllable. We are independent, and that drives them crazy.

“You do have to be fair,” he continues. “I try not to be cruel, although you can be harsh. You don’t want to have too much fun at the expense of someone else’s money, labor, and creativity. Nobody is *trying* to make something bad. It used to be that every bad movie—especially things that were cynical, dishonest, or pandering—I saw as a personal insult to be avenged. Now it takes a little more to make me mad.”

Critics’ power over the marketplace varies greatly in different media. In Broadway theater, for example, the lead drama critic of *The New York Times* still wields an influence approaching that of the Roman emperors’ thumbs up/thumbs down verdict on a gladiator’s fate. A harsh pan can doom a play, while a rave might launch a hit. At the opposite extreme, television criticism may make interesting reading, but its effect on a show’s success is virtually nil. Traditionally, the TV business has listened to only one critic: the Nielsen market-research company, which produces viewer ratings. (That may be changing now in this era of streaming; Netflix doesn’t release its viewing data.)

Film reviewers fall in between these antipodes of influence. “I’m sort of relieved to be in the middle,” Scott says. “Unlike a theater or restaurant critic, my review doesn’t mean life or death. What I say about any *Avengers* or *Star Wars* movie will not change its success in the marketplace. But with a smaller movie, a review can make a difference.

“That’s partly because the sheer quantity—millions of hours of scripted film and television content each year—that critics and audiences now deal with is overwhelming,” he continues. “There is no way anyone can process it all. It can be paralyzing and confusing, and there is a danger of work falling through the cracks.”

Part of a critic’s job, Scott believes, is to prevent that from happening—to say, in essence, “Wait a minute, here’s something special.” He did as much for the 2016 film *Moonlight*, a coming-of-age story with an all-black cast centered on a poor, gay, male. Scott’s review called it an “at times almost unbearably personal film and an urgent social document.”

“I’m proud to have championed *Moonlight*,” he recalls. “I saw it at the Telluride Film Festival. It was a quiet movie with no stars, and wasn’t necessarily destined to catch on the way it did. The big final scene was two guys drinking tea together. It shows the influence of European and Asian work. I felt it deserved more than just modest success. I told readers to go out and see this one. I did a short interview with Barry Jenkins, the director, and worked really hard on the review, writing it by hand in a café in Rome. It ran under the head, ‘Moonlight: Is This the Best Movie of the Year?’” Four months later, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences agreed that it was; *Moonlight* won the Oscar for Best Picture, becoming the picture with the second-lowest budget ever to do so.

THE SON OF two academics, Scott grew up in a scholarly home. By the time he got to college, “Most of the adults I’d ever met were college professors,” he says. His father, Donald Scott ’62, an American historian, is dean of social sciences emeritus at Queens College.

His mother, Joan Wallach Scott, has been professor of social sciences at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, since 1985; her uncle was film, stage, and television actor Eli Wallach. Scott grew up in Chicago, Chapel Hill, and Providence, and recalls being “very literary and bookish as a kid. The point of life

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was to read as many books as I could.”

At Harvard, he concentrated in literature, a small department since absorbed by comparative literature, and was interested in “what was called ‘theory’”—a type of literary criticism derived from Continental philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes. “I was monastically serious about academic work,” he recalls. “I would close down the library.”

His senior year, he moved into the Dudley Co-op on Sacramento Street, a.k.a. the Center for High-Energy Metaphysics, as the legend above its entrance proclaims. “It was great,” he says. Residents shared the housekeeping and could earn maximal work points by cooking dinner every two weeks. Scott learned to cook there, and has pursued cuisine avidly ever since; he is an excellent amateur chef. In the co-op kitchen, he also met his wife, Justine Henning ’88. (“My friends were cynical, punk-rockers, cigarette smokers,” he recalls. “She was a vegetarian, a classic hippie into Indian philosophy and Judaism.”) They married in 1991 and have a son, Ezra, a recent Wesleyan University alumnus—and film-studies major—and a daughter, Carmen, an undergraduate at Wesleyan. Scott himself has taught a film-studies course at Wesleyan for the past few years.

Two years after college, Scott entered a doctoral program in English at Johns Hopkins. “It was a very small department—rigorous, competitive, you might even say sadistic,” he recalls. He took his orals but foundered when it came to writing a dissertation. “You had to specialize, and I was too much of a dilettante,” he explains. “My attention would wander. I didn’t want to be a professor. My heart wasn’t in it.”

Meanwhile, Justine began a doctoral program in history and Judaic studies at New York University, so the couple moved to New York City. Scott felt “miserable, stuck in a thing I had no desire to do.” He got his foot in the door as a book critic when the arts editors of *The Nation*, John Leonard ’60 and his wife, Sue, assigned him to review two books by then Porter University Professor Helen Vendler (now emerita). The assignment paid 10 cents per word, but Scott did his homework thoroughly and “threw everything into it.” He followed this with another on John Updike’s 1996 novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. It ran as *The Nation*’s lead review and Scott says he “just loved doing it. It felt very liberating to be writing for non-academic readers—you can say what you like. With academic writing, everything had to be justified, cited. But here it was possible to have an opinion and just state it. It was also possible to make a joke.”

He adopted the byline “A.O. Scott” when he began writing for *The Nation*. “There were already several famous Tony Scotts,” he explains. “It was not a distinctive byline.” He chose “A. O. Scott” as a homage of sorts to his great-grandfather, an English immigrant on his way to San Francisco who stopped in Ohio, set up shop as a mason, and never left. The family business was “A.O. Scott & Sons.”

A good break arrived in the form of a job at *The New York Review of Books* (NYRB), where Scott spent just over a year working directly for co-founder and editor Robert Silvers. “*The New York Review of Books* has a place in my heart,” he says. “It was a very unusual, intense, literary, and intellectual atmosphere. Bob [Silvers] worked 16-hour days, seven days a week. He didn’t behave like a mentor, but I learned more in one year of looking over his shoulder than I did in all my years of graduate school. I learned about writing, thinking, and the importance of criticism and critical thought. The first half of the 1990s felt like 20 years to me; the second half seemed like six months.”

While working at the NYRB, Scott continued to freelance book reviews, for *The Village Voice* and *The New York Times* as well as *The Nation*. Eventually, Silvers assigned him to write an essay on Cormac McCarthy’s novel *Cities of the Plain*. When it ran, “seeing my byline alongside a David Levine caricature of McCarthy was a thrill,” Scott recalls.

But advancement was impossible at the NYRB, which had no senior editors. Scott therefore moved to *Lingua Franca*, an irreverent, gossipy review of academic life, while continuing to contribute to the NYRB. Eventually he left *Lingua Franca* to write a Sunday column in *Newsday*, and also became a regular contributor to *Slate*.

One of Scott’s *Slate* pieces focused on film director Martin Scorsese. “In my way, I wildly overdid it,” he recalls. “I laid out my grand theory of cinema. It was a good piece that included a cheap shot or two, prompting a grudge that the Scorsese people held for a long time. Years later, Miramax tried to persuade the *Times* that I

shouldn’t be allowed to review [Scorsese’s film] *Gangs of New York*.”

By 1999, he was the father of two children with a burgeoning freelance career. Then *New York Times* editor John Darnton invited him to lunch. Janet Maslin was stepping aside as a film critic at the paper, and, over a chatty meal, Darnton confided that the *Times* was looking for a film critic or two. “I wasn’t going to say no,” Scott remembers, “but I also thought, ‘This is completely crazy.’ I had written one piece of film criticism, and with two young kids, I hadn’t gone to the movies at all that year.”

Nonetheless, he wrote two audition pieces, and soon enough realized that he really wanted the job. In December 1999, he got the offer, and was amazed to find himself with a position at a level he had dreamed of achieving in perhaps five or 10 years’ time. He was not alone in his amazement. When word of his hire got out,

a *Variety* reporter phoned him to ask, in essence, “Who the hell are you?”



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IN JANUARY 2000, Scott acceded to the job of *New York Times* film critic, joined there by Elvis Mitchell, who got the other critic job. When Mitchell left the *Times* in 2004, the newspaper named Scott co-chief critic with Manohla Dargis, an arrangement that has worked smoothly ever since. (Dargis lives in Los Angeles, Scott in Brooklyn, with escapes to a Maine island retreat in Penobscot Bay.) The two take turns at having first pick of new film releases each week. They alternate movies by the same director. “We make it so the distribution of significant films is pretty equal,” Scott says. “Manohla is a very good writer and very smart. We’re good friends. If I read something of hers that’s terrific, I feel I have to step up and do better than I would if I were the solitary chief critic.”

He watches 200 to 300 films per year and reviews 100 to 150 of them, an average of two or three per week. In the darkness of screening rooms around Manhattan, where he sees about 95 percent of the

films he reviews, he has compiled, he says, “hundreds of notebooks filled with illegible notes.” But big commercial releases frequently hold “all-media” screenings in multiplex theaters: essentially sneak previews with a few rows of seats reserved for critics. “It’s useful, and fun, to see a comedy, a horror movie, or an action movie with a civilian audience,” Scott says.

In constructing a review, “the only data you have that you are sure about are your reactions,” he explains. “But to report on your taste is not necessarily useful to anybody else. They might like different kinds of movies than you do. The key is turning your response into an argument that will somehow connect with your readers’ interests.” A basic technique involves linking the reviewer’s reactions to elements in the film that provoked those reactions. “What I’m trying to do is persuade people to think about it,” he says.

“The most important aspect of the relationship between a critic and a reader isn’t agreement, but trust,” he declares. “A few months



ago, a reader who had seen *The Souvenir*—a movie I loved—sent me a note with two ticket stubs enclosed. I don't think he really wanted his money back, but he was making a point that I hear a lot, which is that I had let him down or betrayed his trust. On the flip side of that, sometimes people say, 'We never go see a movie unless you recommend it,' which is meant as a compliment, of course, but which is kind of a terrifying thing to hear. That's a big responsibility.

"I'd say that it's not so important to like things, or to experience only what we like," he continues. "If we didn't sometimes see movies we hated—or were bored by, or didn't understand, or found offensive—we would know a lot less about movies, our tastes, and the world. There are a lot of movies I've found unpleasant or that I've had various aesthetic or other problems with—*White Ribbon*, *The Color Wheel*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Gangs of New York*—that I've found it interesting and challenging to think about. My hope is that my readers are open to that kind of experience as well, and that I can sometimes nudge them toward it. Taste isn't a settled fact; everyone should see their taste as a work in progress."

If Scott's reviews have a polemical thread, it's his distaste for the use of algorithms to predict and control audiences' reactions and tastes—"the notion that 'Netflix will tell me what I like,'" he says. "That is really dystopian. It turns everything into a manipulation of the public."


The *Times* does have a few rules to protect the objectivity of reviewers. Even though other critics do so, Scott and Dargis aren't allowed to sit on film-festival juries or any awards-giving bodies, where they would have a voice in dispensing things of value to filmmakers. At festivals, he has met filmmakers and shaken hands with them. "I might feel I want to be friends with this person," he says. "But then I couldn't do my job. You can't be vicious to your friends when the occasion calls for it. All the movie people have more money than you do, and the vast majority are better looking! You are *not* in the film industry, and you can't fool yourself into thinking that you are."

Still, occasional connections with the creators can be fun. Scott has met director Alexander Payne a handful of times at film festivals and parties. That didn't stop him from writing a 2005 pre-Oscar piece titled, "The Most Overrated Film of the Year" about Payne's celebrated 2004 hit *Sideways*, which won more than 40 awards. "I wrote about the way it was particularly embraced by film critics," Scott explains. "They seemed to identify heavily with the [male lead] Paul Giamatti character." The following year, at the Cannes Film Festival, Scott was standing next to the Palais checking his schedule when a voice came over his shoulder. It was Payne. "You know, I think you're right," the director said. "It was overrated."

"The thing that has surprised me is how much freedom there is with this job," Scott says. "People think you operate under constant rules and taboos. But I have been here through seven culture editors and five or six executive editors, and lived through the *Times*'s transi-

tion from a national print newspaper to a global digital medium, and I have always been able to write what I thought and what I care about. If there is an obscure film that I think deserves attention, I can give it that attention. Now I am working on an essay about Susan Sontag, who looms large in my own work and intellectual life. I've felt immeasurably free to experiment with my own voice and perspective."

THE FUTURE OF film criticism, even for a polished practitioner like Scott, remains uncertain, linked as it is to the future of film



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itself, as well as that of newspapers and other media. "Along with the collapse of a lot of daily newspapers, many of them have shed their arts critics," he says. In addition, consumer-review websites like rottentomatoes.com have brought either a populist voice or a haphazard flood of

uninformed—and perhaps sponsored—opinions into the fray.

"Sometimes I worry that Hollywood as we know it—the seven major studios and various independent players—may disappear," he says. "We will wake up one morning and there will just be Disney and Netflix. Disney just swallowed Fox. They are very good at the exploitation and monetization of longstanding brands—Marvel, *Star Wars*, Pixar. They are armed with a global audience and the Disney name. The sequels and remakes out there leave less room for other kinds of movies. The audience is used to the alibi, 'We are giving people what they want,' but audiences *will* embrace alternative fare. Jordan Peele's movies like *Get Out* and *Us* didn't come from a cookie cutter."

Another danger is the threat that online streaming poses to going to the movies, which might become "a niche, or specialized activity like reading a print newspaper," Scott says. "There's a loss of communal experience. You also lose an aesthetic quality you have with the big screen. Streaming could induce a kind of passivity on the part of the audience, which may get used to 'watching Netflix,' just like 'watching TV.' If things go onto the platform and disappear into an algorithm, I wonder how they can enter the cultural bloodstream."

As of now, though, the ritual in the dark still remains available. Returning to that final scene in *Moonlight* of two characters drinking tea, Scott recalls the silence that hung in the air of the screening room once the movie had faded to black. "You just can't get that, looking at a phone," he says.

Such cinematic moments sustain his belief in the future of film, despite current—and emergent—challenges. "I try not be pessimistic about the 'death of movies and decline of Hollywood,'" Scott says. "My book was written in a spirit of defiant optimism about criticism and human creativity: our drive to create, and to experience those creations." ▢

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