

Critical Condition

A. O. Scott considers the state of criticism—including his own

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BETTER LIVING THROUGH CRITICISM: HOW TO THINK ABOUT ART, PLEASURE, BEAUTY, AND TRUTH BY A. O. SCOTT NEW YORK: PENGUIN PRESS. 288 PAGES. \$28.



Anton Ego in Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava's *Ratatouille*, 2007.

In Wilfrid Sheed's caustically hilarious 1970 novel, *Max Jamison*, the titular hero—the “dean of American critics,” as someone introduces him, and also a bit of a bastard—can't shut down his brilliant critical instincts even when off the clock. When is a brilliant critic ever off the clock? He pans his wife (“God, he hated stupidity”), and lying awake at night, he pans his life (“*The Max Jamison Story* failed to grip this viewer. Frankly, I found the point eluding me again and again. The central character is miscast”). He disparages his looks (“Thinning hair might be all right but not for Christsake in lank black strands, plastered from left to right”). When his marriage breaks up because his wife doesn't like being married to a critic, or maybe because he fucks like he writes (“He made love with vicious authority, clinching his point”), he moves on to reviewing his casual bedmate's “vacuous whimpers and stereotyped writhings.”

He's such a great critic that his own internal monologues, too, are fodder—“Arguments that began ‘in our society’ always turned out badly,” he mocks himself. This inner critic is even more of a condescending bastard than the professional one. Not only can't Max enjoy a teen movie with his son because he's too busy demolishing it in his head, the need to demolish it just confirms what a has-been he is: “You're uptight. You're an old man,” the inner critic jeers. “You're as good as dead. A great, rusty corpse, propped up in plaster bandages, laying down the Mosaic law.” Even his occasional sentimentality about his children is held up to ridicule—“Like Hitler weeping over a dead cat”; his post-divorce melancholy too is judged inauthentic: “Oh yes, you can feel sorry for yourself, Max. *That* emotion you can manage—your party trick.”

Welcome to the oh-so-enviable interiority of the successful critic.

Max's plight came to mind while I was reading A. O. Scott's *Better Living Through Criticism*, since Scott, a lead movie reviewer for the *New York Times*, also has an inner critic, to whom he's assigned a starring role in this book. His more sober chapters on culture and aesthetics are punctuated by Jamisonian bouts of hectoring self-examination in Q&A form, with the unleashed inner critic cast as judge and jury. Sometimes the questions are lobs, inviting Scott to define his critical values and ponder such topics as the nature of aesthetic judgment, but sometimes the interrogator is in a foul mood (“You need to get over yourself”), and their sparring swerves into demented quarrels, the familiar self-berating back-and-forth of inner life lived under critical siege.

Letting the waspish inner critic loose was a savvy rhetorical device, allowing Scott to avoid the pomposity of The Critic Reflecting on His Role (as Max Jamison's inner critic castigates him when Max's thoughts turn toward his profession: “Please, not another piece on the role of the critic. It was an occupational disease, defining and redefining one's role”). Because Scott's self-appointed role is to defend criticism against the parade of grievances leveled at professional

critics—you know, that they're joyless, failed artists, parasites, and unacknowledged sadists—these jousting sessions get the grievances out in the open while also beating them back. His cultural bona fides, too, becomes the subject of sparring: What is he but a typical Gen-X-er struggling with middle age—parochial and pretentious, self-medicating with culture. “Punk rock saved you from feeling late for everything, and then a little after that hip-hop freed you from the nagging sense that you inhabited a stale, small world of provincial whiteness. . . . Your life is college radio, literary snobbery, a conspiracy of the high and the low against the middlebrow; TCM and Adult Swim and the Criterion Collection . . . the narcissism of small differences elevated to an aesthetic principle.” The self-mockery skillfully offsets potential accusations of hubris for supposing his readers want to know all this, when we've all got equally compelling cultural playlists of our own.

Indeed, Scott is a dexterous hubris-avoider. Or mostly he is, crafting the persona of a self-doubting everyman who doesn't take himself too seriously despite his own critical-deanship. Politically, he's drawn to the demotic mode: *Criticism is the most democratic of the arts*, he wants to think. We all do it, we're *all* experts! Everyone's capable of suspending personal prejudices and open-mindedly taking on critical objects.

Yet his defense of the critical enterprise can also lean toward the megalomaniacal, lending the book an occasionally seesawing momentum. Against skeptics who'd charge that criticism is parasitic, not creative on its own, Scott not only wants to dissolve the hierarchical distinctions between what artists do and what critics do, he'd like to see them reversed—for the world to understand that criticism is the lifeblood of art, not its enemy. Criticism is an art in its own right. Wait, not just an art, one that may supersede all other arts! It's larger and more encompassing—“not parasitic, but primary.” Maybe it's not critics who are failed artists, but artists who are failed critics—after all, isn't all art really critical commentary on what came before? Look at Shakespeare, noted ransacker of cultural cupboards; look at “Ode on a Grecian Urn”; look at the French New Wave: would-be critics all.

Scott is a great summoner of examples and anecdotes: vastly knowledgeable about every medium and byway of Western culture from antiquity to Pixar, ranging easily from Gissing's *New Grub Street* to the Rolling Stones to why people cried at Marina Abramović's “The Artist Is Present” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Woven in are highlights from the history of criticism—Aristotle's *Poetics* to Kant to yesterday's hatchet-job book review. He feints low, ruminating on the fictional food critic Anton Ego in *Ratatouille*, then reaches high, pronouncing on the hugest aesthetic and existential questions with deceptive ease. What does art do? It's an urge to master and add something to reality. What is the greatest human purpose? A longing to restore a sense of lost wholeness. Why do we create? Out of

primal feelings of alienation, perceptions of our subsequent decline. He fears not the large claim. His critical bon mots—“Art perpetually hovers in the neighborhood of sex”—manage to be provocative rather than reductive, compacting volumes of scholarship into insightful epigrams. Or this great summation: “Modern culture, as surveyed in the annals of modern criticism, looks like a series of funerals punctuated by episodes of zombiism.”

Oh, regarding my critical admiration. Just as *Max Jamison* opens with Max at the theater during intermission awkwardly encountering the author of a play he's not especially enjoying, because everyone knows everyone in his world, I too am likely to run into Scott—it's still a small world and I know him casually. Most critics will occasionally find themselves in similar positions. Has that influenced this review? Perhaps it has, though personally I suspect there are just as many grounds for critical bad faith when you *don't* know the author you're reviewing, which can be just as distorting. It's far easier to form projections, to malign, upbraid, or impugn, when at a safe remove from the object of your critical scorn.

Which brings us to the question of whether criticism really is an honorable sort of activity, as Scott is eager to claim, against criticism's critics. I may have more qualms on this score, though I understand his resenting the resentment criticism engenders. The scheme he's devised to confuse his opponents is a stream of self-deprecations about the dismal situation of the daily critic. What kind of person becomes one but a weirdo loser? Isn't it embarrassing to be a grown man watching *Kung Fu Panda* in the afternoon? “How exactly is that a job?” is a question he says most critics have heard, or asked themselves.

But have they really? Does the critic really get so little respect when his *Kung Fu Panda* review has the imprimatur of the *Times* and will be read by a million digital subscribers and 625,000 daily-print payers? When Scott pooh-poohs the daily reviewer's job as “a combination of scholastic drudgery and entertainment” leading to the “churning out of book reports,” you find yourself wondering if all this self-disparagement is just a bit of faux penance for having nabbed such a dream job, a labor-saving device for defanging the haters.

But how can you hate him? You might envy him, both his erudition and the great gig, and the effortlessly genial critical style on display (at least, he makes it seem effortless) even when he's panning the “soulless corporate spectacle” of massive hits like *The Avengers*, for which he was lambasted on Twitter by its star, Samuel L. Jackson. Jackson proposed that Scott be fired and find a job he was actually capable of doing—but how great to actually be Twitter-flamed by Samuel L. Jackson.

A deeper reason for anxiety is the economic situation of criticism in the digital age. Everyone may be a critic in Scott's republic of letters, but most critics are donating their labors for free, for Jeff Bezos's enrichment, not their own, and how long can criticism last as a profession when content wants to be free? But as the book under review demonstrates so well, criticism is indeed an art, and one few carry out so elegantly—despite the displays of humility, Scott runs intellectual circles around even those “Hall of Fame” Amazon reviewers. Yet the ersatz populism of the moment demands the critic cut himself down to everyman proportions lest he be seen as a toff. Knowing that self-effacement is part of the gig, the culturally attuned Scott whittles accordingly.

Even if you find yourself suspecting that Scott may be the most well-adjusted critic in Gotham and the neuroticism more performed than felt, it's an entertaining performance. Flagellating himself for his shallowness while writing with sensitivity and depth is a perfectly calibrated balancing act, and I only resent him the teensiest bit for the skill with which he pulls it off. □

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