

Film : A.O. Scott: a New York Times critic's view

By Sam Decker
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Like anyone growing up in America in the early 70s, A.O. Scott watched a lot of movies. But unlike many of his peers, he also immersed himself in the craft of film criticism. "I was always interested in movies and I was always interested in criticism as a kind of writing and I guess those two things eventually converged," says Mr. Scott, who has become one of the country's most highly regarded film critics.

Taking a break from preparing for a family vacation to Maine, The New York Times critic talks with enthusiasm and animation about the challenges of reviewing movies. "I try to be as balanced as I can but also as emphatic as I can. That's sort of the tricky thing. You don't want to be wishy-washy because that's not a very satisfying thing for readers, but sometimes that's how you feel. And most of the time, most movies are not completely terrible and not fantastic."

This is not the case with "The Edge of Heaven," one of his favorite among recent films. He describes it as telling "a very rich and complicated story. Just even to begin to describe it and explain why I think it's so interesting is a real challenge."

Mr. Scott will screen the film July 30 at the Chilmark Community Center, as part of this summer's Martha's Vineyard Film Festival. A relaxed and engaging speaker, clearly engrossed in his subject, he will discuss cinema and answer questions about his work as a critic.

"The Edge of Heaven" was written and directed by the young German filmmaker, Fatih Akin, whose films "tend to be about this split identity of Turks and their descendents living in Germany, and going back to Turkey, and not quite belonging to either place," says Mr. Scott. "It's not the kind of story you feel like you've seen a dozen times before. You feel like it's really exploring some very interesting things about modern life."

Mr. Scott graduated from Harvard with a B.A. in English, and then dropped out of his graduate program at Johns Hopkins to focus on journalism. He wrote book reviews for various national magazines and newspapers, such as The Village Voice and The New York Times Book Review. He enjoyed critiquing books, but he wasn't satisfied. "I always sort of hoped I would be able to branch out and write about other art forms and popular culture," he says.



He got his chance in the late '90s while working as a book critic for Newsday, a newspaper based in Long Island. He remembers getting a call from the editor of The New York Times, who asked whether he'd be interested in applying for an open film critic position.

"I didn't think it was remotely possible, but I thought, 'Well, I don't have anything to lose.' And then there was this sort of mysterious process where I kept getting called back and meeting with other editors and then all of a sudden they offered me the job."

Considering that he has now been reviewing films for The

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New York Times for almost nine years, it is understandable that Mr. Scott would enjoy a break now and again. "It's

sometimes very pleasant to watch a movie and know that I don't have to write about it," he says. "When Manohla [New York Times film critic Manohla Dargis] reviewed Batman, I went to the screening with him and it was very nice to sit there and know that I was not going to have to review it. When I'm going to review a movie I immediately start thinking about - almost automatically - what I'm going to say, what's my lead going to be, what's some funny joke I can make. So it's nice to switch that off sometimes."

By his estimation, Mr. Scott watches around 300 movies a year, "which means I still miss a lot," he adds, underscoring the challenge for those in his profession to keep pace with today's robust and ever-changing world of cinema. While discouraged at times by the low standard set by Hollywood blockbusters in terms of quality and originality, Mr. Scott is quite positive about the state of cinema and excited by its dynamic growth.

When asked to name today's most influential filmmakers, Mr. Scott's answer is as immediate as it is unexpected. "Pixar," he says, citing the studio responsible for unconventional, yet overwhelmingly popular animated films like "Toy Story," "Finding Nemo," and "Monsters Inc."

"Pixar has had an enormous influence on other filmmakers," says Mr. Scott, "and in a way has reinvented movie making by adapting very new technology to some very old and traditional forms of cinematic story telling. You see a movie like 'WALL-E' and it's just amazing in how completely it creates this new reality and it's also amazing in that it's replicating classical cinematic techniques."

Filmmakers are also utilizing digital technology in surprising ways, he says. "We're at a stage right now where the technology of filmmaking is changing in a huge way. The digitalization of the art form is happening very quickly and in ways that don't always involve special effects and animation." Mr. Scott cites director David Fincher's digital manipulation of the current San Francisco skyline to appear as it did in 1971 for his 2007 film, "Zodiac," to avoid having to recreate the setting physically.

Technology aside, Mr. Scott asserts that there are immensely influential filmmakers working today, "in terms of what kind of stories they are telling."

Neorealism is a term used to describe films, many of which are made in Eastern Europe and China, that depict the lives and relationships of people affected by social or political struggle. "There's all this stuff going on in the world, these very complicated experiences like mass immigration, globalization, the transition from communism to capitalism in Eastern Europe. We want to know how all of these things affect people's lives and what kind of stories come out of that."

As part of the summer film series of the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival, New York Times film critic A.O. Scott will present "The Edge of Heaven," Wednesday, July 30, at the Chilmark Community Center.



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