

THANK YOU AND GOOD NIGHT: Jay Scott Ten Years Later

JULY 30, 2003:

While flipping through the morning papers, it was easy to notice that Toronto's media was understandably caught up with that day's huge benefit concert, now referred to as "SARStock", which went down all day in the middle of nowhere-- that is, North York. While this event was certainly important and for a worthy cause, on this day I had to ask one question: Did anyone else but me remember that it was ten years ago to the day in which Canada and the world lost its greatest film writer?

Of course I could be speaking of none other than Jay Scott, whose witty, hallucinatory, informative, sometimes acerbic and always energetic reviews graced the entertainment section of The Globe and Mail. His untimely death from AIDS at the young age of 43 caused a huge outpouring of tributes from writers, filmmakers and admirers alike. It seemed that everyone before or behind the screen mourned the loss of a true giant in film criticism, and even literature in general (if you consider film criticism literature, which I certainly do), and most of all, a close friend, whether or not they personally knew the man. From 1977 to 1993, Scott's prose was instrumental in getting people to explore perhaps unknown regions of cinema, and most certainly, he was influential for a lot of people in journalism and beyond. Few writers of that time would not admit that they borrowed a bit from his style: myself included. What I took away most from his writing (besides the paragraph-long sentences, and mine still pale in comparison to his) was his rare ability to see how film grafted into the rest of pop culture. In addition to his whirlwind writing style, perhaps this was Jay Scott's greatest gift. In any Jay Scott review, regardless of whether it was for an obscure arthouse film or a Hollywood blockbuster, one could find references to literature, painting (Rabelais was a favourite), fashion and, of course, other films (Fassbinder was a favourite). Even films which he panned emerged under his pen as something that mattered- be it due to these multiple references, or simply because his breathless writing elevated whatever he happened to be reviewing. In other words, his work had the rare gift to see the universality in all things. In the age of Pac Man and McDonalds', he showed us why we would and should be interested in even a small film from the furthest edge of the globe. To be certain, Jay Scott earned a substantial following, both for his style and his reportage, and whether or not they would end up agreeing with his opinions, people trusted his taste enough to warrant checking things out.

Quite simply, reading any of his pages was a sense of discovery. To quote from Robert Fulford's Toronto Life posthumous appreciation, reading Jay Scott was a matter of "look what I found". One could, with a rather knee-jerk reaction, think that while he was discovering these little arthouse works, he was putting down Hollywood films, yet that is not entirely true. Generally, his tastes were unbiased-- he would equally praise or pan either. Above anything else, he wrote for himself, which was/is an uncommon thing for any entertainment journalism. Most film criticism (especially these days) exists to tell the reader whether or not one should spend eight bucks on whatever is being reviewed. If Jay Scott found something he liked he would tell the world about it, and tirelessly defend or promote it. But he wasn't interested in writing a consumer report-- thankfully, his work was blissfully absent of "thumbs up / thumbs down" schtick.

Many people who are passionate about films seldom read or respect film criticism, but this is mostly unfair. Largely, people disrespect film criticism because the majority of it can be biased, dispassionate, and their skin-deep analyses of cinema only treats Friday's new releases as commodities. However, like any other form of writing, film criticism is also an art. Certainly, the overall purpose of film writing is to tell the reader (or viewer) whether the movie is any good. Further, I think one should read criticism as being an interpretation of the film, in addition to being a discussion of the film's content. But most importantly, film writing is, and can be, an art like any other, if the critic thinks enough of their reader to make their pieces entertaining, personal and stylish, as well as being informative. Whether or not one ends up agreeing with the critic is beside the point-- one should understand that theirs is merely one reading of a film, and you are equally entitled to your own. Their words are not gospel- they exist to tell you what you may or may not expect. I consider myself a "film criticism junkie", and I seldom agree with any of my favourites-- Jay Scott, included. But my favourite film critics (from Jay Scott to J. Hoberman) are so because they bother to treat their work as something else than a chore, and aren't afraid to push the envelope once in a while. Above and beyond anything else, the passion pokes through.

One must be aware of just how much power film critics really have. Lest we forget, Siskel and Ebert were largely instrumental in getting everybody to see HOOP DREAMS, a three-hour documentary (three words which instantly label the film as "box office poison"). Or by the same token, look at the universal critical trouncing of the J-Lo / Ben Affleck vehicle, GIGLI. Tell me, is it *really* one of the worst films ever made? Jay Scott may not have turned everything he liked into box office gold, but he certainly convinced a lot of people to see something that they might have otherwise ignored or missed altogether. (In his day, his reviews would adorn the walls of the Carlton Cinema, Toronto's own arthouse multiplex) To cite one example, his raves over DIVA were instrumental in making that film the arthouse favourite it was. The film's own distributor had dumped the

picture, yet quickly changed their mind when people suddenly began to fill the theatres. Many people who normally did not see foreign films saw DIVA, and indirectly, down the line, it was all due to Jay Scott.

Someone once wrote that Jay Scott's period (1977 to 1993) as a critic was during a time when cinema was the least interesting. This statement could be read two ways. Firstly, one could only wonder what his writing would have been like if he was reviewing films when cinema culture took off in the early 1960's, where there was a masterpiece every few months (to paraphrase Susan Sontag). Secondly, after STAR WARS, Hollywood stopped being interested in making little personal movies, and just wanted to make big, mindless escapism. This is fine, as long as the needs of others' are still being fulfilled at the same time. Therefore, perhaps we *were* fortunate in having Jay Scott around during that time, because discerning filmgoers needed help in finding the movies which would interest them.

Because I am a generation younger than most people who read Jay Scott, my first exposure to him was actually via television, not print. In the mid-1980's, when I first became interested in cinema, he would host a six-week series, "Film International", on Wednesday nights during the spring on TVOntario. In 1990, "Film International" became a regular installment, first on Saturday nights, then on Fridays. On the dial, Jay Scott was doing what he had been doing in print-- bringing some obscure films to a public which may not get to see them otherwise, introducing the work with his patented style (he was the rare TV host whose commentary still sounded like print), and if we were lucky, he would follow the film with some interviews. This program was a work of genius-- think for a moment what he was really doing. If one lived in Toronto, and read one of his raves about an obscure film playing down in the Carlton, one could at least go down to see it before it disappeared. But what about someone in Georgian Bay, who may be interested in seeing these films, yet would have no possible way of accessing them? In my hometown, even with the advent of home video, before "Film International", the only way I could ever see foreign film was on CBC's French Channel (without the help of subtitles).



To this day, I am indebted to Jay Scott for having this show, which opened up a lot of avenues of cinema. (In addition to foreign-language cinema, he would also program some smaller British, Canadian, and even independent American films) Even now, one cannot find many of the films that he showed on television (am I glad I taped a lot of them). It was from his program which I then discovered his work in the Globe, and like everyone else, read him a lot, not only to see what was coming out, but mostly to see what he would think of it. However, if I had to narrow my gratitude to Jay Scott down to one thing, it would be for introducing me to the films of Aki Kaurismaki. This Finnish director's work is still difficult to see in a big city, let alone at a Smalltown Cinematheque of One.

Perhaps it was the evident joy of his own work that made me find the joy in my own writing. In those days, I wrote even more than I do now. Best were those nights that I would fall asleep early in the evening, and then wake up at about 3 or 4 in the morning, and stay up to write while the sky changed colours. But in any case, whether I was writing poetry or film reviews I was striving for that kind of flowing, cinematic, inverted structure which was so abundant in Scott's language. Looking back on what I was writing ten years ago, not a lot of it may have been any good, but that is beside the point-- we all have to start somewhere. But, I was one of the many who were influenced by his style.

Finally, in the summer of 1993, when I was preparing to move back to Toronto for the second and final time, Jay Scott passed away. His death was unfortunately indicative of many people in the arts or entertainment communities in the late 1980's and early 1990's who had died far too young. He had never kept his illness a secret, certainly, but even right up until his final days, he kept on working. (In fact, in the spring of 1993, I remember his wit still being sharp when he wrote a column that renamed the Oscars as "Masturbation Theatre.") Perhaps this was why his passing was such a shock. It seemed that he ignored the prospect of death right up until the moment of... at least in his work. However, in hindsight, the writing was on the wall. For instance, for one entire month of "Film International" programming in the fall of 1992, Scott was conspicuously absent-- he was replaced by Kay Armatage. I am not certain if this was due to his being on assignment elsewhere, but given that he had looked noticeably frail for a year or so, we were nonetheless made to wonder. In the spring of 1993, some installments of "Film International" featured films that dealt with AIDS (such as PARTING GLANCES or DEAD BOYS' CLUB). In hindsight, this ghoulish bit of programming reflects his coming to terms with his mortality, and also, in a way, his moribund sense of humour.

My favourite Jay Scott Story (and one heard many just after his passing) takes place one day before his death. The late film writer David Overbey went to visit his friend in the hospital- Scott was flat on his back in bed smoking. Overbey commented on the cigarette, and asked if the nursing staff knew he was smoking in his room. Scott replied that they probably did, as they should have been able to smell it. Overbey asked, "Have they said anything to you?" Scott replied, "Well what are they going to do, say, 'Mr. Scott, you're in big trouble?'" Up until the final moment, Jay Scott had his dark sense of humour, valiantly laughing at death, all while dying with his boots on. (On the Friday he passed away, he was planning to write a book review.)

As I was going to school to work in the communications industry, I had often wondered if Scott's path would ever cross with mine. And they could have, however metaphysically-- his funeral was during the week in which I was actually in Toronto, looking for a place to live in the fall. (No, I didn't go.) After his passing, there was a tremendous outpour of tributes from fellow writers and even from filmmakers abroad, who had much respect for his work (and it is rare that filmmakers ever respect critics; but still, despite his friendships with these film artists, Scott would still honestly give a film a bad review if he saw fit).



Not least, "Film International" would be introduced by guests who knew Jay Scott and shared their memories (among them, Overbey, and TVO producer Risa Shuman). The Bloor Cinema had a double-bill in his memory- POURQUOI PAS and VERONIKA VOSS (it would have been improper not to put a Fassbinder film in the program, no?). I was at the screening that night-- and it was rather discomfoting that the love and attention that he received in the media did not transcribe to real life. There were only a few dozen people in attendance. Leaving the cinema that night, I had thought to myself that Scott's death was indeed the end of an era. Suddenly the romantic notion of a Cinema Paradiso kind of community was nowhere to be found.

Our culture has a strange fascination with people who died much too soon; from James Dean to Jim Morrison. I'm certainly not excluded from this phenomenon (however, why this behaviour exists I think is the basis for another article entirely). For myself,

and I'm certain for others, this posthumous time was spent collecting as much as I could of Jay Scott's work (ten years later, I *still* haven't found his book on artist Helen Hardin). In the fall of 1994, a collection, Great Scott, was released, featuring a sampling of his writing over his 16-year tenure at the Globe. And then, when my brother passed away three months later, I came to realize just how immature this fascination with the dead was-- it does not come close to a real-life tragedy. I think that Wayne's death was responsible for me forgetting about this ghoulish obsession with death. I wanted to think about life more.

Ten years on, I look back at the spring and summer of 1993 as a period when I had a head full of optimism and ideas-- unrealized dreams which had yet to be corrupted by the real world, by personal uncertainty, to be forgotten about just by life. I started wishing for that clear head I had then, and secretly, the desire to start over again to satisfy the creative needs that I had neglected. And then, in an irony I'm sure Jay Scott would have recognized, my tenth anniversary remembrance of the man was also averted by death. While preparing this issue, my mother passed away-- once again, death put my life in perspective, making me realize just how trivial my own aspirations are.

One could say that Jay Scott was the last of Film Critics As Superstars, in which the writers' personalities could be seen in their work. (And like many great writers-- he did have a personality that carried itself outside of his work; he was as colourful in real life, with his leather, motorcycles and his humour.) In the early 1960's, film was at last being taken seriously as an art - and there was simply an explosion of cinema from all parts of the globe, from the French New Wave to the American Underground, from Cinema Novo to the Italian New Wave. And suddenly, there became the need of film critics to inform the public about all that was happening. People like Pauline Kael or Andrew Sarris became larger-than-life for their opinions-- indeed, one never agreed with all of them -especially the caustic John Simon- but one would not deny that their work was exciting to read. Be it Sarris' Auteur Theory, or Kael's condemnation thereof, one would read these works because they were passionate enough about what they do. I've often considered Jay Scott our equivalent of the critic Andre Bazin, and I don't mean because Bazin died at the age of 40. Scott's work was not full of Bazin's heady theories (thank Goodness), but both men put considerable influence on other writers. Bazin's Cahiers du Cinema staff went on to become filmmakers which forged the French New Wave. This of course did not happen among the people that Scott inspired; however in a parallel story, he gave Canadian filmmakers lot of due recognition (something they still require).

Today, this kind of lionization of a film critic is virtually non-existent. Perhaps this is due to the oversaturation in the Age of

Information, or perhaps it is also because of "Do It Yourself" culture. If Jay Scott is looking down at Earth from the Big Movie Theatre In The Sky, I wonder if the irony-loving writer would've seen the very irony in how the cinema and critical landscapes had changed just after his death. Thanks to the Internet, one is simply flooded with film reviewers. To paraphrase an amusing thought by Kevin Smith, the Internet has so much potential for many things, yet all people do on it is review movies. (Guilty as charged.) But also, in age of "Do It Yourself" culture, anyone can post their film reviews online, and anyone can publish a film magazine on their desktop printer (ahem!). It is the old adage that everybody can do it, regardless of whether everybody should. In other words, with this bombardment of information, it is getting harder and harder to find the genuine art in it anymore-- so many opinions, yet so few genuine voices. Film writing has become more dime-a-dozen than ever. Plus, it is getting harder to take it seriously-- TV ads for the latest Hollywood dreck always have these blurbs of praise from someone you've never heard of, from some newspaper in the middle of nowhere. Lest we forget, Sony had the whistle blown on them for releasing advertisements for their movies, featuring quotations of praise from someone who did not exist!! This last feat is outrageous, yet it makes perfect sense-- The Age of Information has become so full to the point in which it is now The Age of Facelessness.

Therefore, in hindsight, we need someone like Jay Scott again. During his reign, cinema as a whole was bland. Just after his death, ironically enough, cinema from roughly 1994 to 1996 became as interesting as it was 25 years earlier. And now that we're back into the muck of the same old generic crap, it would do us good to have Jay Scott back to help us sort this stuff out all over again, and most assuredly, it would be made exciting all over again. Still, one must wonder what he would have thought about any film, big or small, which was released after his death. What would he have made over the fade-outs and fade-ins on the same shot in Krysztof Kieslowski's BLUE, the 76-minute blue screen in Derek Jarman's BLUE, the monkeys dreaming of stars in the beginning of BARAKA, the phenomenon of something called PULP FICTION, the frogs in MAGNOLIA, to name a few. It is unpredictable what he would think about the highlights that did occur in cinema after his passing-- but of this be sure, whatever we can imagine, we'd be wrong. Additionally, chances are, he would find other things to talk about.

Although my reasons for forgetting about Jay Scott are probably more personal than others, it is sadly understandable that the passage of time has faded his influence... that life goes on. Punching in his name in an Internet search retrieves very few pieces, at least those with any insight, mostly some archival stuff on the [Globe's site](#). Whether we prefer to think of it or not, the Internet has changed a lot of ways we do business, and especially, communicate. 20 years ago, our diction had considerably lessened to short simple phrases, and now that everyone is online, our brains have been dulled a bit more. Our ability to read long sentences has been affected. So when I was re-reading his work in preparation for this issue, I was thunderstruck by how I had forgotten his style-- all of the paragraph-long sentences with all of their asides, which simulate stream-of-consciousness, but are actually very ordered.

We need Jay Scott again in the Age of The Double-Click. His name deserves to be recognized posthumously in the vein of Lester Bangs. Both men have similar styles, although Bangs' is less disciplined, and both shared the unique gift of comparing their subjects with things all around us. Perhaps this idol worshipping is for a good cause after all. It is filling a considerable gulf in today's climate. I am once again reminded of how he has influenced myself and others. Perhaps too little, too late, all I can say is, Thank You.

I miss you.

For more on Jay Scott, please visit this issue's installments of "Print Film" and "Short Takes".