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The Art of Talking Back to the Screen with Movie Critic Wesley Morris

Pulitzer Prize winner Wesley Morris takes us behind the scenes of his job as a movie critic

November 7, 2014, [Craig Barboza](#)

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One of the most frequent questions people ask Wesley Morris is how can he do his job and still enjoy going to the movies. Morris is a Pulitzer Prize-winning movie critic who writes for *Grantland*, a pop culture and sports website in New York. The perception is that because he is paid to intellectualize his responses to movies, he couldn't possibly derive any pleasure from them. "They want to know if I turn my brain off," says Morris, scrunching his eyebrows together. "I've never wished that I could turn my brain off while watching a movie."



Movie Critic Wesley Morris

What would be the point? The reason Morris is as good a critic as he is (and why people care about what he thinks) is that he sees things others miss, and this knowledge heightens his appreciation of certain aspects of a film. He has a trenchant eye and is chock-full of movie references. Many times his reviews are as entertaining as the movies themselves. Writing about *Let's Be Cops*, a raucous comedy that opened this past summer, Morris said, "Let's be clear: No one should choose this movie. It's a title in search of a plot. It could also have been called Let's Be Funnier, Let's Be Directed, Let's Be 15 to 30 Minutes Shorter, Let's Be 22 *Jump Street*."

Morris tends to like movies that "say something about the world instead of blowing it up." He fell in love with movies at a young age, and still remembers sitting with his mother for hours watching Marx Brothers and Greer Garson pictures on AMC. When he was in eighth grade, a teacher who'd read one of his critical essays told him he might have a future as a writer. He had never thought of making a living as a critic until then. After graduating from Yale, he began covering movies for the *San Francisco Examiner* and was later hired as a film critic by the *The Boston Globe*, where he won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2012. Morris became only the fourth film critic ever to do so. According to Martin Baron, the former editor of the *Globe*, Morris is an exciting critic whose writing reflects his personality. "When you read Wesley, expect to be taken along for a wild ride. You're in his mind and in his heart, almost in real time as he experiences a movie," says Baron, now the executive editor of *The Washington Post*. "His work is fresh, original, visceral, fun, exhilarating, uninhibited — never clinical, academic or distant — even as it incorporates a deep knowledge of film."

Earlier this year, Morris moved to *Grantland*, where he could publish long form criticism, a rarity these days. He is the only movie critic on staff, which means he spends a good portion of his time

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writing about films, talking about them and going to screenings, as many as four or five a week. He now lives in a brownstone apartment in Boerum Hill; he works there and in the *Grantland* offices near Lincoln Center.

One morning late last month, a few days after seeing the race satire *Dear White People*, Morris sat down to talk about his job. He had plans to see *Interstellar* the following day and in the afternoon he wanted to watch the final episode of *The Knick*, which he would talk about in a podcast later in the week. But even with a full plate, Morris, who is short with an athletic build, a dry wit and a joyful laugh, never appeared to be rushed or distracted. We chatted leisurely for two hours. Not once did he turn off his brain. Below are excerpts from our conversation.



Martin Baron, left, editor of 'The Boston Globe' and Wesley Morris, a film critic for the paper, who was awarded the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for criticism during an announcement ceremony in the newsroom on Monday, April 16, 2012. (Photo: Matthew J. Lee/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)

Has 2014 been a good year for the movies?

This fall, for whatever reason, has been legitimately good up to this moment. I've enjoyed writing about the movies. I've enjoyed talking about the movies that the people are seeing, like *Gone Girl* and *Dear White People*. People seem to be really excited to see a handful of movies. I feel like it's been a very good year. This will also be the year in which just about every major American director of a certain generation — and level of talent — will have released a movie: David Fincher, Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson, Christopher Nolan and Alejandro González Iñárritu. These are the guys in their 40s and 50s. They're all making high-profile films that are coming out within six weeks of each other. It's interesting seeing all these directors do things at the same time.

What do you think people will be talking about come Oscar time?

I don't know. There are movies that are conventionally Oscar movies. This year, there's a movie called *The Imitation Game* and it's about the British mathematician Alan Turing [played by Benedict Cumberbatch] and how he was persecuted for being gay after the war. There's also *Unbroken*, that Laura Hillenbrand book that's now an Angelina Jolie-directed movie.



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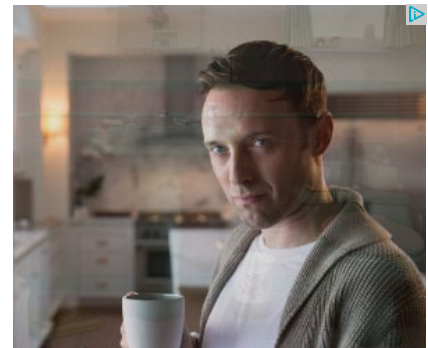
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Wesley Morris discusses the 2013 Academy Awards with Katie Couric and Editorial Director of 'People' and 'Entertainment Weekly,' Jess Cagle on Couric's ABC show, 'Katie' (Photo: Lou Rocco/Disney-ABC via Getty Images)

Do movie release dates really make a big difference?

For certain moviegoers, a release date at least clears several hurdles of presumed quality. [speaking in a cultivated voice] "Well, I know it's probably good. It comes out on Christmas Day and it's based on that book that everybody read. So I should probably go see it. And Angelina Jolie made it!"

Moviegoers have been trained to think like Academy voters, and it's a completely unnatural way to watch movies, to assume that because it's fall the movies will be smarter and more adult, which has not really turned out to be the case.

When you review a film that has been adapted from a novel, do you always read the book?

Not always. I have no hard philosophy about that. It depends on what you think you want to write about. Do I need to read Thomas Pynchon's novel *Inherent Vice* to write about the movie *Inherent Vice*? It probably helps.

What advice do you have for aspiring critics?

Well, I know what I like to read because I've read a lot so I'd just say, read other critics and figure out what you like. You should definitely be well versed in many areas and use your expertise. Find an angle in the medium that a lot of people don't apply. If you're a doctor who wants to write about movies, or the medical aspect of movies, be a doctor about it! I also feel like some demonstration of humor, seriousness and wit is important, as well as the issue of morality; that's something that's missing from a lot of criticism I read. There are a lot of wrong things that happen in movies — like the ongoing lack of people of color in a certain class of Hollywood films, or what function women are serving — and more critics should be capable of picking up on those things and articulating what they are.

You started writing reviews for the *Yale Daily News*. Is being a critic very different from how you imagined it?

I think people's interest in critics is greater than I imagined. I'm always being invited to do panel discussions or to go to people's classes and I know a lot of other critics who are being invited to do stuff. That was the thing I would not have been able to account for: the general public curiosity about how criticism works and what a movie critic does.



Alison Willmore ('BuzzFeed'), Wesley Morris ('Grantland'), Eric Kohn ('Indiewire'), Owen Gleiberman ('BBC') and Peter Biskind participate in this year's film critic's panel at FilmColumbia Festival (Photo: FilmColumbia)

You recently spoke on a panel about film criticism — what was your favorite question?

Yeah, that was at the FilmColumbia Festival. We had Owen Gleiberman from the *BBC*, Eric Kohn, who runs *IndieWire*, and Alison Wilmore, who writes for *BuzzFeed*. Peter Biskind, who runs it, moderated the panel. It was good! Some things came up that I hadn't really thought about. Someone asked a question about independent thought and whether a critic feels obligated to think the way everybody else is thinking. The question was posed as an art house issue. If everybody likes *Boyhood*, do you then feel obligated to like it too?

It sounds like a form of peer pressure. How did you answer?

Yes, which is different from the way I heard that question. I wanted to talk about reviewing very popular movies, ones that have been mass marketed to the point where the entire planet thinks it's the greatest product ever, and what that experience is like when you don't like the movie and you sit down and write the review.

The *Times* recently came under fire for an article in which a critic labeled television producer Shonda Rhimes an "angry black woman." What did you think of that?

I was actually shocked by that story. I couldn't believe they ran it. I couldn't believe that as many editors as claimed to have read it, read it! And had no suggestions for maybe changing the wording, or the structure of the piece. I know if I turned that in at *Grantland*, somebody would've been like, Well, maybe what we want to do with this piece, just maybe, is unpack it a little bit and figure out how you can argue that these women are or are not angry, where that anger is coming from, what it is doing in the respective shows, etc.

Do you have a favorite line from one of your reviews?

No, but I remember writing in a review that probably nobody read for a Nicolas Cage movie called *Drive Angry*. It came out in 2011, and there's an actress in it, Amber Heard, who I called a bridge between Scarlett Johansson and Kristen Stewart and I said, but I wouldn't feel safe crossing that bridge. [laughs] I don't know why I like that line so much. And I'm sorry that it's in that review and I didn't use it somewhere else, but ... if anybody else had written that line I would have tweeted it all day.

What happens when you run into people who didn't like what you wrote?

Every once in a while I'll go to a cocktail party and run into the guy that runs X studio and I'm just like, Oh, yeah. When I [diss] one of his movies, he really doesn't like that. It's not personal. It's that, theoretically, I potentially cost him money ... It's a little different now that I'm not writing for the *Globe*, where they claimed to see a real causality between positive reviews and good revenue and a negative review and a lack of revenue. And I took that power seriously. But at the end of the day, my job isn't to make you money. It's to write about the things that you produce and distribute. When Tony Scott at the *New York Times* wrote his review of *The Avengers* in 2012, people were threatening to kill him. Sam Jackson said he should lose his job. That was two years ago. I think when *The Avengers* sequel, *Age of Ultron*, comes out next year, if Tony's like, "whatever" — who knows?

Do you get any perverse satisfaction from writing a film's death sentence?

It depends on what it is and who made it. Sometimes you get a movie that is so bad that you want to equal the movie's badness. It's an opportunity to sort of call attention to a particular kind of badness. There was a movie that came out at the end of the summer called *Begin Again*. It's the most ridiculous music industry movie I've ever seen. Mos Def and Mark Ruffalo are running some allegedly indie label that put out what would've been the equivalent of the Beastie Boys and De La Soul. "We were doing that but now we need to stay current!" So Ruffalo leaves the company because they weren't real enough, but the *real thing* he finds is Keira Knightley singing droopy songs in a coffee shop? Fuck you! It's like the Starbucks movie ever. You see a movie like that and you want it to die. You want it burn in hell because it's so inauthentic. So I get pleasure out of that sort of thing, but in that case I'm not attacking a person for having made the movie. I'm just saying, this movie is stupid and it doesn't have any idea what good authentic music is.

Walk us through your process. How do you write a review?

I watch the movie. I take notes, extensive notes. Here, I'll show you. [*He pulls out a small notebook from his backpack, undoes the band around it and flips through a few pages, stopping at his chicken scratch for The Judge.*] "I respect the law. I'm not encumbered by it." That's a line of dialogue. I usually write lines of dialogue, characters' full names, because the press kit doesn't always say them, and I try to include some thought, some opinion, I guess, or some sense of whether this movie is working or not. [*He turns the page.*] I'll know by the amount of detail I've written if there's a particular sequence I'm going to use. But most of the time I remember the gist of what I want to do once I leave the theater.

What's your favorite movie theater in New York?

I'm probably going to hell for saying this, but the AMC Lincoln Square. I feel most comfortable there. It's really well run. When you leave your glasses after a midnight show, they will help you find them. [*laughs*] I also work two blocks away from the theater, so that helps. And there's something about Film Forum. I go there once a month to see the older movies. I love how intimate that theater is; sometimes it's too intimate. I remember seeing a Polish movie by Pawel Pawlikowski called *Ida*. It was on a Sunday afternoon and the theater was packed. It was a short black-and-white movie, and you could hear the sniffing and the coughing, people moving uncomfortably in their seats. And when somebody couldn't understand what was going on they'd say [*blares, in a Polish accent*], "WHAT JUST HAPPENED?!" The movie doesn't have a lot of sound. So it's one of those things where everybody's like, "Shut up, Morty." I also love that pillar that's in House 1, where you can still sit behind it and it partially obstructs your view because I've been the last person in the theater and have had to use it. I actually love Film Forum.

The legendary film critic Pauline Kael didn't start making a living as a reviewer until she was in her 40's. You're 39 now. Do you plan to keep reviewing movies until you retire?

I plan on writing until I retire. Who knows what I'll feel like doing in even five years? But right now I feel pretty good.

Do you think you'll ever make a film yourself?

No, I got to be honest, I have too much respect for the craft of moviemaking to soil it. It's hard work and I'm not going to sit here and say that only filmmakers should make movies, but ... I kind of think that only filmmakers should make movies.

I thought all movie critics secretly want to be directors.

That's what bitter filmmakers think about critics. But think about it, Martin Scorsese is a pretty good film critic. Mike Figgis, film critic. All those French New Wave guys? They were critics! At some point there was a real relationship between criticism and filmmaking. I actually studied filmmaking because I thought I wanted to be a filmmaker. But I've just seen so many great movies that, when I leave the theater I'm just like, uck, I would just rather write about why that is so great, which in itself could produce a kind of greatness. And I like trying to do that. I don't have a need to compete with the Charles Burnetts and Paul Thomas Andersons and Lars von Triers of the world. I'm much more comfortable writing criticism, and happy doing that.

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