

Callousness creeping into film criticism

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A poster for Ammani.



Rate

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The world over, there is a creeping callousness about movie criticism. Last year, I remember Thierry Fremaux, Cannes Film Festival supremo, being upset about critics dashing off their reviews without any considered thought. Some of them begin tweeting their impressions to their websites or magazines or newspapers even while a movie is going on, he rued and said such an unhealthy practice must be checked.

Fremaux was right. An opinion tweeted in haste and without reflection has the possibility of being incorrect or even unfair. And besides harming a film, it can mean dissemination of incorrect or half-baked views to a reader.

Now, cinema is a huge, huge business involving billions of dollars. Each movie costs a humongous amount of money — and effort. A lot of planning and detailing go into making a film.

So, should a critic or a reviewer be so cavalier as to write about a movie without spending some time thinking about it? The answer must be a clear no.

There are two important reasons why reviews are being penned these days in such hurry. One, newspaper/website editors are in a race – imagined or otherwise – to be the first to publish a review. Many are hardly bothered that such hurriedly keyed in impressions can be unjust. They can even be way off the mark as far as factual accuracies go.

I remember a legendary critic like Derek Malcolm (now 85) – who has had a long and illustrious stint with The Guardian and later The Evening Standard – being pressured at Venice a few years ago to file a review of about 300 words in 20 minutes. He had to rush to the

writing room as soon as the credits of a film began to roll, and dash off a comment. "Often, I cannot even formulate my thoughts properly," he used to complain to me.

And can you imagine such a review appearing under his byline! This could have been ruinous to his own reputation and that of the paper. But Malcolm had no choice in those days.

Two, there is an irresistible urge among young journalists to start writing reviews the day they walk into the profession. In my long career, I have come across many, many 20-somethings who came up to me to ask how to become a movie critic. And they would have got into a newspaper or magazine barely weeks before that.

When quizzed why they would want to do reviews so early in their career, the standard answer would be: Sir, I feel that review columns are widely read and commented upon. True, but this is all the more reason why one should not become a critic till one masters the nuances of the medium.

Some years ago, there was a huge movement in France to keep critics out of special shows that were held before the actual release of a film. Producers there felt that especially newer/younger critics were being unduly harsh in their reviews. This was affecting boxoffice prospects.

France has had a history of such animosity between critics and producers. In 1958, a young Francois Truffaut – later a celebrated French critic and auteur – was asked not to attend the Cannes Film Festival. Considered to be a vituperative critic who spared none among the old guard of cinema for their outdated style of movie making, he was declared persona non-grata that year. It is another story that he returned to Cannes the following year as a director with his debut feature, 400 Blows, and walked away with the Palm d'Or.

In today's Tamil Nadu, press shows are seldom held before a film's opening. Often they are organised the same day of the release, for producers fear that "unthinking" comments made on Twitter and Facebook have the potential to destroy a movie at the boxoffice even before it begins its roll. Tamil Nadu has another problem. Most so-called critics who attend a press show are mere bloggers, and their responsibility is limited. They do not have to answer to an editor, and hence tend to be rash or irrational in their opinion.

Surely, these are difficult days for film criticism as a profession. With too many self-styled critics who have a platform each in the form of a blog (sometimes a website), cinema criticism has ceased to enjoy the kind of respect which it did during the days of Pauline Kael, Roger Ebert, Derek Malcolm and Chidananda Dasgupta.

Ammani

Director-actor Lakshmy Ramakrishnan's third film in as many years, Ammani, despite notable performances, suffers from a structural pitfall. The title character, Ammani, played by an 80-something Subbu Lakshmi, is only seen in fits and starts during the first half of the 92-minute movie. It was later, as it appeared to me, that Ramakrishnan (who essays the 57-year-old Salamma) realised that she had to give screen space to the elderly lady – who certainly steals the show from Ramakrishnan, who like so many director/actors has this fascination to keep the camera on themselves. Not that she is bad. In fact, she is splendid as a civic worker on the verge of retirement.

Widowed at an early age, Salamma sweeps her way through to raise her three children – a daughter and two sons. While Salamma's relationship with her daughter is estranged, the younger woman does not hesitate to send her grown up son to try and get his grandmother's retirement money. Which is a paltry two lakhs plus with almost the entire amount having to be given away to a money lender. But this does not deter her grandson or Salamma's two sons and their wives from eyeing the money. One of the sons is a wasting drunkard, while the other drives an autorickshaw, having taken a loan for it in the hope of repaying it from his mother's little booty.

With the family squabble taking centre stage for much of the narrative – with a liberal show of poverty and angst – Ammani, also a widow and who happens to live in Salamma's dilapidated home, goes about collecting empty plastic bottles at night and sells them. We find later that the old woman has collected quite a pie – which again becomes a point of lure for the grandson, sons and their wives.

Often, Ammani's plot resembles a lecture in morals, and familial tiffs and the grab-money line have been the subject of many films. Ramakrishnan's work, as such, has nothing novel to write home about. But, yes, the performances of the two women are marvellous – one with her mischievous twinkle in her eye and a never-say-die attitude, and the other weighed down by remorse and regret seeing the utter selfishness in her children. Some catchy lines, but they do not lead to a believable climax.

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