

Cannes Film Festival thinking of radical change this year

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BAD FEEDBACK: Films such as Sean Penn's *The Last Face* were ripped apart by critics back when they were released.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Two years ago, the General-Delegate of the Cannes Film Festival, Thierry Fremaux, was angry that journalists were Tweeting about movies even as they were watching them during exclusive Press shows. He called this irresponsible journalism, and was upset that such quickies dashed off in the social media or web papers without any considered thought or reflection would do more harm for a film than good.

I think he was absolutely right, and all the more so, because Cannes could be a cruel venue for a producer or a director or an actor. A movie that gets ripped apart carries a black mark which is not easy to erase. And, I think it is awfully unfair for a filmmaker that his creative work should be dealt with in such a casual and callous manner. It costs lots and lots of money to make a movie, and humungous effort as well. And a film needs some consideration.

So, I am not surprised that Cannes, which is all set to roll its 71st edition this May on the French Riviera, is planning some radical changes. One of them – to begin the 12-day annual event on a Tuesday, instead of a Wednesday, and end it on a Saturday, not the customary Sunday – has already been announced.

The other change that is being mulled over is to have both the Press show and the first public screening, (which is usually an evening black-tie gala) at least for the big titles at the same time. This can soften the blow for a movie which might have got a drubbing from critics who would have seen it earlier on the day of the public show. I suppose this helps prospective buyers, festival programmers and others to walk into a public screening with an open mind, not one that may have been vitiated by an adverse Press.

Bad Press is a strong possibility, given the kind of tough film critics who assemble at Cannes, and there are 4,000-plus there. And so many of them can be Tweeting their reviews even as a movie is rolling. Really unfair. But how do you stop them? One way is to ensure that critics watch at least the big films along with the general public, largely made up of industry professionals – as is the case at Cannes.

Some weeks ago, Fremaux quipped at San Sebastian: "We are living in a new world. The Press used to have a screening 24 hours before the public show, because they needed time to write their articles and then for it to be published. Now, we are living in 2017, when everything is instantaneous."

He said that he had already made up his mind on this issue even if it was still being debated in the boardroom of the Festival: "I'm asking the question, and of course I have the answer, but don't you think that it could be better to have the Press screening and the gala screening on the same day, at the same moment, at the same hour, in order for the movie team to arrive in total innocence, to make both the gala screening and the Press screening two big world events."

I know having covered Cannes for 28 years how toxic Press shows can be. They are famous for loud booing. And high-profile Competition works can be savaged. I have seen how Sean Penn's *The Last Face*, Gus Van Sant's *Sea of Trees* and Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny* were torn to shreds by a ruthless Press. At least one of Shaji N Karun's films was humiliated when just about everybody walked out of a Press show.

"The atmosphere at the Press screening can be awful, everybody knows that, and it's journalists who complain the most about that. So, I prefer to have the gala screening with the audience – and that the audience can also be very tough – and the Press show at the same time and then to compare the two, so it's a pure world premiere," Fremaux averred.

He added that the time was now right "because we are opening a new decade in Cannes (71st edition), so we have to think about the future. We are wondering what Cannes has to be in order to be efficient, even for the Press, because Cannes is made by the Press, it's very important for me, that's why I like to argue with them."

However, the media is apprehensive about such a drastic change. This can mean missing deadlines for some papers. And some journalists suggested that the Festival could place an embargo on reviews. But this is easier said than done – what with hundreds of social sites and

errant critics.

Even the Oscars failed to achieve this once. There was a time long ago, when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences shared the names of Oscar winners with the Press before the actual awards ceremony. The Press was asked to abide by a strict embargo – not to publish the list until it was officially announced.

But one paper broke this trust, and the rest suffered, because the Academy stopped this privilege of giving the winners list to the Press in advance. And mind you, this misdemeanour happened during those times when there were no mobile phones, no Internet and no social media. Today, with all these at one's beck and call, it may be no easy task to reign in critics.

This year, the Cannes Film Festival will take place from May 9 to 20.

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