

The festival is now radically political, in tune with times

April 18
2017

11:08 PM



Cannes Film Festival is celebrating its 70th anniversary this year.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The other day, a Facebook “friend” asked me why movie festivals were getting increasingly political in their choice of cinema. Many years ago, a cartoonist had said that some of the greatest films were made against the backdrop of political or social turbulence. He quoted as example *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca* and so on that went on to become classics, all-time favourites. Why even a delightful musical like *The Sound of Music* unfolded during the Nazi invasion of Austria, and had a breath-taking climax which blended the sound of the marching German army with the musical notes of the renowned Von Trapp family singers, who play protagonists in the picture.

It is keeping with this spirit of times that one notices movie festivals these days have begun to zero in on subjects that are political, sometimes overly so. And the upcoming Cannes Film Festival, all set to celebrate its 70th anniversary from May 17 to 28, has an official line-up that is radical and will talk, about among other things, the socially disturbing refugee crisis plaguing Europe – a phenomenon that is nothing new to India, which has had to grapple with huge exoduses since 1947. Apart from the bloody partition that year, the Bangladesh war and the Sri Lankan civil strife later have led to masses of men crossing over to India.

Refugees apart, Cannes will showcase movies about climate change (which US President Donald Trump terms a joke), cruelty to animals and the threat of nuclear weapons (North Korea being a case in point).

So, we have *An Inconvenient Sequel*, a follow-up to a documentary made by Al Gore, and Vanessa Redgrave’s *Sea Sorrow*, a deep insight into the present migrant crisis. There is one more refugee drama by Hungary’s Kornel Mundruczo, *Jupiter Moon*. There is also a documentary called *Napalm* by Claude Lanzmann, and the work is about the bad boy of the season, North Korea. A Netflix-funded fantasy work with Tilda Swinton, Bong Joon-Ho’s *Okja*, has been described as a “very political picture about the way we ill-treat animals” (Jalikkattu supporters, are you listening?).

But let us hope that American President Donald Trump’s “unpredictable behaviour wouldn’t overshadow the Cannes event”, quipped the Festival President, Pierre Lescure, at a press meet in Paris last week called to announce the selections.

The Festival’s General-Delegate, Thierry Fremaux, announced at the same press conference a few novel features which the 12-day event on the French Riviera will offer. One of them will be the Virtual Reality fare in the official selections, Alejandro G. Inarritu’s short, *Carne Y Arena*.

In all, there are 18 titles that will compete for the top Palm d’Or, and 16 in the festival’s most important sidebar, *A Certain Regard*. Besides these, we have categories like *Outside Competition*, *Special Screenings*, *Midnight Screenings* and *Classics*, and Fremaux said he and his team had watched 1930 films this year – with 29 countries making the cut. There are nine first works – a Cannes tradition of discovering talent while not forgetting the bigwigs who had helped the festival to dream and dare.

But India and China are not to be seen in the list.

For Indians, this disappointment will be all the more acute this year, because while Cannes is all set to celebrate its 70th anniversary, India will be commemorating 70 years of Independence this August.

For a distraught India, 2017 will be the second year in succession without a movie in the main Festival sections (though *The Cinema Travellers* was part of the Cannes classics in 2016), and the answers to this absence of Indian cinema have been varied with two interesting Facebook quotes.

Srinivasan Narayanan, who headed the Mumbai Film Festival for many years and who was responsible for the event overtaking India’s national festival at Goa’s Panaji, says: “In 70 years we have not learnt to make globally stunning movies. Why don’t we start looking inwards?” Cinema producer Jay Bajaj, who lives for a good part of the year in Goa, quips: “Indians don’t make films for Cannes – they make them for themselves.”

Both Narayanan and Bajaj may have a point, but one would think that the answer is not that simple. And we got a hint of what might have actually happened during the long and backbreaking selection process at Cannes when an Indian reporter at the press meet quizzed Fremaux about the mystery of the missing Indian movie on the Croisette (Cannes beach front).

Fremaux looked positively embarrassed, his smile tried to hide this feeling of discomfort. He asked the reporter, "zero?" Yes, came the reply to which Fremaux asked, "zero, last year?" The answer was once again in the affirmative. Clearly, Fremaux seemed to be a loss for words. He said India was a great film making culture, "but it is the situation (which dictates choices)". Maybe he meant that there were no Indian titles which were sufficiently reflective of today's politically charged atmosphere. This year's Cannes titles are clearly political in their themes.

However, Fremaux held out hope when he told the Indian reporter that Cannes would be adding a few more titles, and India might figure in it. He quickly added: "It will not be because you asked the question".

So, Indian cinema can keep its fingers crossed. \

Nonetheless, Fremaux minced no words during his interview with Screen soon after the press conference, and they had a bearing on a country like India, so obsessed, as Bajaj wrote on Facebook, with its own cinema.

To a question by the Screen reporter why Thierry gets irritated whenever journalists ask about their national cinema in the festival's official line-up, he averred: "It's silly to say I am from such and such a country and why isn't the cinema of my country represented. I've received emails from the whole world saying it was grotesque. I'm talking about universality and they are talking about 'my country, my country'. If they ask that question it's because their newspaper owners ask them to do so. I find this ridiculous. We're there to talk about cinema, not national flags."

Fremaux could not have hit the nail more directly and more forcefully. Cannes – as also Venice or Berlin or Rotterdam or any other international movie festival – is all about cinema from the world. It is not only about Chinese or Indian or Russian cinema. Festivals are the best platforms for showcasing films from even the tiniest nations in the remotest corners of the globe. So, it is really meaningless to seek one's national cinema in a place like Cannes. Or be obsessed over it.

But as Fremaux rightly pointed out, media barons were responsible for pushing their journalists into chasing cinemas from their respective regions. As one movie critic working for a leading Indian television channel told me: "Imagine going to Cannes and trying to interview an Aishwarya Rai or Preity Zinta when we could be spending that time watching some exquisite global fare and trying to meet celebrities from Germany or France or Iran or Africa..." I remember my own experience with an Indian news agency some years ago, when I was, time and again, pestered to get a 'bite' from Indian actresses walking the red carpet. How silly, I thought that the agency had only India in mind at a Festival like Cannes celebrated for its international flavour and fare.

I must, though, add here that The Hindu – where I worked for a quarter century – never confined itself to such narrow parochial view. Year after year, I wrote about the world cinema at Cannes in the columns of The Hindu – helping to spread a significant awareness of the 12-day event among Indians. From a couple of Indians at Cannes in the closing years of the 1980s, the number has grown to a few hundreds. And these men and women make their annual pilgrimage to the Mecca of Movies in the south of France to savour the cream of world cinema.

* Gautaman Bhaskaran has contributed to the Cannes Film Festival's 70th anniversary edition of a volume, which will be out at the end of April, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com