



# More gems from Cannes, and an adieu

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**T**he Cannes Film Festival has seldom disappointed me over the quarter century that I have covered it. It has, invariably, offered gems. Last week, I wrote about a few that were part of the recently concluded edition of the Festival. Here are a couple of more movies that floored me.

Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu* is a gripping indictment of religious fundamentalism. To be precise, it is about Islamic extremism that the auteur narrates and comments on through very ordinary characters, through everyday situations and through sparse frames. There is nothing dramatic about this film – so far removed from the kind of cinema that India makes.

*Timbuktu* opens with a group of gun-toting men in an open van chasing a deer in an African wild. The panicky animal is running for its life even as the men tell each other not to kill it, but just tire it. This just about sums up the mood and theme of the movie: to enslave people to a religious doctrine by tiring and terrifying them into stupor, into demeaning obedience.

But men being men, there is rebellion and this emerges from very mundane incidents. When the fundamentalists ban music and order women to cover even their hands, one fisherwoman asks, but how am I going to sell my ware with gloves on!

Sissako seems to suggest through such incidents that the new plague in Africa is not colonialism, but the religious terror inflicted on the inhabitants by radicals. And the film was shown at Cannes uncannily at a time when 300 Nigerian schoolgirls had been abducted.

Through images that seem monastic, the screenplay has been inspired by an incident that took place a couple of years ago in a small city in the north of Mali. In 2012, Islamic Jihadists executed a couple for raising children without being properly married. They were stoned to death after having been buried in sand till their necks. This was the starting point of a bloody conflict between the simple people, whose faith is reverential, and extremists, who brandish guns and go about forcing men and women into subservience.

Sissako revolves his plot around a couple, who live with their little daughter and a herd of cows in an almost idyllic condition outside a town. Their innocence is played out against and elaborated through a series of fundamentally crazy episodes.

And we are told that religion or even a trace of it is just an excuse to trample insubordination. This could not have been brought out more explicitly than in the final scene where we see the daughter running in a state of absolute fear. She takes the place of the deer. And like it, she is alone with her parents gone.

We saw another kind of fear in *Two Days, One Night*, helmed by Belgian brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, who have always given us extraordinarily moving pieces of cinema (*Rosetta*, *The Child*, *Lorna's Silence*, *The Kid with a Bike*). *Two Days, One Night* is a haunting document of how a society can come together to face odds posed by the monstrosities of consumerism.

Sandra (essayed by Marion Cotillard, who portrayed a whale trainer in the 2012 Cannes entry, *Rust & Bone*) is about to lose her position in a solar energy factory, which is struggling against fierce Asian competition. Her boss tells his 16 employees that if Sandra were to keep her job, they would have to forego their bonuses. Sandra and her colleague convince the boss to hold a referendum through a secret ballot on a Monday in which the employees will decide whether they are willing to let go their bonus.

Sandra, desperate for the income and afraid that she would lose it, has two days and a night to try and plead her case with her co-workers.

The Dardenne Brothers script a riveting story, with entirely different situations that take Sandra to almost every colleague of hers that Saturday and Sunday. Some see her, some refuse to speak to her, some plead their inability to give up their bonus. One woman splits from her husband, because he opposes her idea of giving up that extra 1,000 Euros.

Sandra meets one of the colleagues on a football ground, another in a supermarket, where he is trying to earn extra bucks by working the weekend ...

Besides, these delightfully novel ways of pushing the story – with each meeting that Sandra has with her co-workers being narrated differently – the social relevance of the movie fascinates. And while the outcome of the referendum is never very clear, what is most touching is the way *Two Days, One Night* ends. It is not just a great twist, but a poignant way of telling us how caring human beings can be.

While this film might not have been as gloriously energetic as *The Kid with the Bike* was, Cotillard's performance infuse a kind of raw passion into the plot. As the woman fighting to save her job, a job that her family needs, she is just marvellous, especially in those scenes where despair beats her down.

Gender issues may seem simplified, even clichéd, but the picture works up to a subtly dramatic high, and teaches us that in the ultimate analysis "no man, no woman, no company and no country" could ever hope to be an island.

## A legend bids adieu

The conclusion of the Cannes Film Festival also marked the end of the long road for Gilles Jacob, the legend who had been an inseparable part of the 12-day annual event on the French Riviera.

Jacob, 83, retired as the Festival's



# TIMBUKTU

UN FILM DE  
ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO

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President, a post he had held for the past 15 years out of the 35 he had been part of Cannes. And as he saw stars and other celebrities ascend the famous Red Steps of the Grand Theatre Lumiere for the past 12 days this year, he could not have but felt a sense of loss and pain. For, he would be descending those very steps at the head of which he had stood year after year welcoming the guests.

He told in an interview during the Festival that "there's almost a religious aspect to the steps, as if you were going up to Heaven." And he felt that the mix of Hollywood glamour and European art house had made Cannes the Queen of all Festivals.

Over the years, Jacob had grown into a legend who just about everybody respected and held in absolute awe. One studio executive averred that in the days gone by, if Jacob were to shake someone's hand on the Red Carpet, it was viewed as an incredible honour.

Jacob has often been credited with not allowing too much of commercialisation to creep into the Festival. He valued and upheld, above all, the independence of

the Festival. "Diplomatic and political independence, professional independence and financial independence, which I achieved, with much difficulty, little by little," he said. Jacob managed to give art cinema to a wide audience or intelligent popular cinema. "They are the same thing".

Beyond these, Jacob is the man who created A Certain Regard for off-beat cinema (Kanu Behl's *Titli* was part of it this year), the Camera d'Or Award for first features and the Cinefondation to support new directors.

Next year, Pierre Lescure, a founder of Canal Plus (French cable channel), will take over as the Festival's President. Jacob will continue to serve on the Festival's board and as President of the Cinefondation.

Meanwhile, Thierry Fremaux, will remain the General Delegate of the Festival with Christian Jeune as the Deputy. These two men, for all intents and purposes, are the ones who actually run the Festival.

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