

Cannes troubled by Netflix, terror, jury misses

May 30
2017

10:31 PM



Diane Kruger got the acting trophy for her role in the film *In The Fade*.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Sadly, the Cannes Film Festival's much-touted 70th anniversary that ran from May 17 to 28 turned out to be a huge disappointment for me. For one, much of the attention was grabbed by security concerns and the Festival's row with the American streaming giant, Netflix – a conflict that almost turned into a spat between two jurors on the opening day. And they chose to use the jury's first press conference to air their views in what seemed like an open conflict. While the jury president and celebrated Spanish auteur, Pedro Almodovar, supported the Festival's official stand that Netflix must release its competition titles in French cinemas before it gives them to the small screen, the extremely popular American actor, Will Smith, countered this by saying that he saw no harm in Netflix preferring television to a theatrical release. My own children watch a lot of Netflix, he quipped.

With two Netflix titles, *Okja* and *The Meyerowitz Stories*, competing for the Festival's top Palm d'Or, the Cannes chief, Thierry Fremaux, was understandably under pressure from French theatres owners – who insisted that these two movies be first given to them before being offered to the subscribers of the streaming service. Fremaux himself has been an advocate of theatrical supremacy, and he voiced this in no uncertain terms, even going to the extent of saying that 2018 onwards he would not allow streaming giants, like Netflix, to compete unless they agreed to the cinemas first rule.

But honestly, I have never seen two jurors airing their diametrically differing opinions during a press meet. Even when the Danish master, Lars Von Trier, had expressed (though jocularly) his support for Hitler, none of those from his *Melancholia* cast sitting with him at a media conference spoke anything against him. That was dignified, even though what Von Trier did was ridiculously notorious. So, the Almodovar-Smith public tamasha seemed in real bad taste.

The other issue that kept the Festival on its toes and made life miserable for journalists racing into the theatres was the threat of terrorism. France has suffered horribly. We have seen how cartoonists in a major French journal were gunned down in their own office. We have witnessed how a joyous crowd celebrating Bastille Day in Nice (which is 30 minutes away by road) was mowed down by a truck. The driver was a religious fanatic. And midway during the 2017 Festival, Manchester was shaken by a terror strike, and Cannes grew even more tense with several more layers of security being added to the already existing ones. Somehow, all this robbed the pleasure of pure cinema that Cannes has been known for.

Finally, I think the last nail on the coffin came when the jury ignored some of the deserving films. Certainly, I feel the Russian entry, *Loveless*, (written about in my earlier column), ought to have won the Festival's top Palm d'Or. But it only got a jury prize (seen as sort of consolation), with the Palm going to the Swedish work, *The Square* – about an art gallery owner's bad times, including being mugged on the street, called a racist and being the architect of a promotional campaign that sees a man pretending to be an ape and molesting a woman under full public glare. I found this work too stretched and exaggerated.

Apart from *Loveless*, the other glaring miss was Naomi Kawase's moving tribute to the blind in *Radiance* or *Hikari* in Japanese. Here she takes us into the world of the blind and partially-sighted – tracing the relationship between a photographer, whose vision is fading, and a woman who pens movie audio descriptions.

Kawase uses disability most artfully to weave a love story between Misako (Misaki Ayame) – who is writing a description for the visually challenged – and Nakamori (Nagase Masatoshi), a celebrated photographer. He is one of Misako's listeners. On the verge of blindness, he is caustic and angry. Misako has her own tragedies to grapple with: a father who mysteriously disappeared several years ago and a mother sinking into dementia. Perhaps these misfortunes push her to understand Nakamori's frustration.

Radiance – Kawase's fifth work to debut in the Festival's Competition – draws us softly into Nakamori's and Misako's world that sees disillusionment, rage and arguments till a chance meeting pulls them towards each other. An emotionally charged scene in which he feels

her face is far more erotic than a kiss they share later.

Turkish moviemaker Faith Akin's *In The Fade* got Diane Kruger the much-deserved acting trophy. The film deserved something better than just this, though Kruger was fantastic as a mother in sheer agony after losing her baby boy to a neo-Nazi attack in Germany. Her husband, a Turk, is also killed. When she fails to get justice in Germany's legal system, she sets about looking for the culprits, a young German couple. She detonates a bomb in the caravan where the couple are staying, also killing herself. Some saw this as promoting violence and encouraging suicide bombing. Not me. I saw this as a mother's anguish over the loss of her baby boy.

Sofia Coppola's (adjudged best director) *The Beguiled* with an array of actors like Colin Farrell, Nicole Kidman and Kirsten Dunst was also one of my favourites. Set three years into the American Civil War in the mid-19th century, *The Beguiled* explores sexual tension and desire in times when men were scarce and yet the identity of a woman was intrinsically tied to a man.

This is apparent when the superbly playing Colin Farrell appears as a wounded Union soldier, Colonel John McBurney (part of those States which opposed slavery and wanted to abolish it) in Virginia (one of the 11 States whose cotton plantation economy made it imperative to hold on to black bonded labour). As he lies faintish in the woods, one of the seven women in the Farnsworth Seminary, run by the strict Miss Martha (excellently played by Nicole Kidman, who won the Festival's 70th anniversary award), finds him and takes him in. Troubled by conflicting pulls of Christianity to help those in need and a sense of loyalty to her confederate fighting to retain slavery, Martha is also disturbed by the awakening of her own sexuality at the sight of a full-bodied man.

* Gautaman Bhaskaran has covered the Cannes Film Festival for 28 years, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com