

# cinema

## Films with a view

Movies with strong political undertones were all the rage at this year's Venice film festival, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

**O**ften, great films tell great political stories. Or, at least they unfold against the backdrop of tumultuous social and communal events. The 1939 *Gone with a Wind* would never let us forget the American Civil War. *Casablanca*, which opened in 1942 bang in the middle of World War II, was set against the exodus of hundreds of people fleeing Nazi tyranny and into the New World as America was then promisingly called.

The European Holocaust and the Partition of the subcontinent inspired many to use them. Who can forget M S Sathyu's masterpiece on the tragedy of Partition, *Garam Hawa* (1973), narrated with a deep sense of sorrow and seen through the eyes of a Muslim family that chooses to stay back in India?

So, it is not very surprising that major movie festivals across the world have begun to select in a compelling sort of way works that are political. Sometimes, overtly so. At other times, covertly. This year's Venice Film Festival on the island of Lido was not different.

Interestingly, Venice once grew out political compulsions, the desire of Mussolini, Hitler and other Fascist leaders to invite the world to watch their point of view. That alone, and they could tolerate nothing else.

When French helmer Jean Renoir's anti-war masterpiece, *La Grande Illusion* won the Jury Prize at Venice in 1937, Hitler was so angry that he banned the movie in Germany and Italy.

A year later, when the Venice jury wanted

to honour an American film, Berlin put pressure at the last minute, and the top prize, Mussolini Cup, was shared by two shamelessly propaganda works – Leni Riefenstahl's documentary *Olympiad* (on the 1936 Berlin Olympics that, though, went on to become a classic) and Goffredo Alessandrini's *Lucciano Serra: Pilote*.

Such blatant rigging and Fascist cheerleading angered especially the French contingent, and Philippe Erlanger, a civil servant, who was part of it, returned home convinced that a counter festival – of the free world – was absolutely necessary. That was the seed out of which the Cannes Film Festival grew and blossomed. Unfortunately, World War II intervened, and Cannes could roll out only in 1946 after an aborted start in 1939, a day before Hitler's army marched into Poland.

The Venice-Cannes rivalry lives on till this day, with one refusing even to consider a movie that the other may have rejected. The brighter side to this is that both try and get the best of world cinema, trying to outdo each other. The more political the fare the better, it would seem. And the fare at Venice this autumn was so very political.

One of the well received films at the 11-day annual cinema event that began on September 1 was *Meek's Cutoff*, a Western from a woman's point of view by director Kelly Reichardt. Set in 1845, the movie follows three pioneering families as they head towards the Pacific Northwest to begin life afresh. Persuaded by a smooth talking guide called Meek, the families leave the main group convinced that the man would take them to a fertile region.

Lost midway in an absolute barren land with very little food and water, the men, women and children capture a Native American, who seems to be their last hope of survival.

In a briefing, Reichardt said the movie – based on a true story of mountain man Stephen Meek, who misled a 200-wagon party into a difficult-to-navigate area with no water – had a “modern-day political parallel”.

The project began “around the same time the controversial photos of US soldiers' position with Iraqi war detainees emerged ... Just following a leader who doesn't know what he's doing, who's maybe ignorant or stupid, that can happen at any time,” she said. The helmer was undoubtedly comparing Meek to George Bush.

Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski's



\* Clockwise from top: Scenes from *Meek's Cutoff*, *Post Mortem* and *Essential Killing*; bleak visions.

political thriller and special jury prize winner, *Essential Killing*, took us back to the Iraq war. It had Vicente Gallo (yes, the same guy who attracted the loudest of boos at Cannes with his pornographic *Brown Bunny* five years ago), essaying a Taliban terrorist. Captured by American soldiers and transported to an unknown location in Europe (where CIA black sites to aid US government's war on terror are rumoured to exist), the Taliban escapes when his vehicle crashes on snow-bound terrain.

The film is a hard look at man's instinct to survive and we see the Gallo character going to unbelievable lengths to live as he is chased by helicopters and soldiers on ground with the fiercest of dogs. It is a savage movie that unsettled me: there were moments when my sympathy lay with the fleeing prisoner, who in his desperate hunger suckles the breast of a woman feeding her child.

But when he goes on an overdrive killing lumberjacks, the Taliban's concept of revenge and retribution (termed as essential killing) began to get me wavering. Another chilling movie came from Chilean director Pablo Larrain. *Post Mortem* is set in the Santiago of 1973 – during the dark days of a military coup to overthrow Salvador Allende, who reportedly committed suicide.

Alfredo Castro's Mario types autopsy reports in a morgue, and he faces the horror of the upheaval outside when he and his colleagues are asked to perform a post

mortem on Allende. In love with a cabaret girl, Mario's life goes for a toss when she is hounded by the military because her brother is a Communist agitator. The film crackles with a sense of dismal oppressiveness, and each time a corpse is cut open, a strange allegory seems to be drawn between the autopsies and the destruction outside. The horror of the coup hits us.

But nothing could have been as bleak and distressing as Wang Bing's 112-minute drama *The Ditch* on the life of Chinese outcasts in the Gobi Desert in the 1960s, when hundreds of educated citizens were sent by Mao and his men for what they termed “re-education”. The so-called rule of the proletariat strove to convert men into labourers, men who had lived their lives using ink and pen.

These men in the desert lived in utter inhuman conditions. Fatigue and hunger drove them to eat rats, one another's vomit and even human flesh. Hundreds perished and were buried in pits without any kind of identification.

In a climax that jolts us, we see a young widow at the Gobi camp searching for the body of her husband: distraught and wailing, she finally sees his body, parts of which have been eaten up by men-turned-cannibals.

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