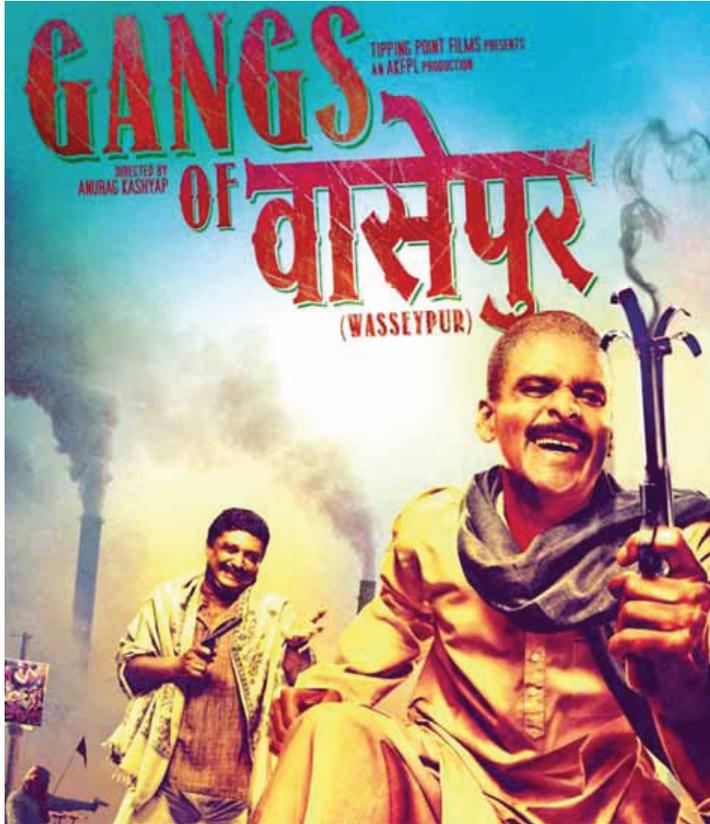


cinema



* *Gangs of Wasseypur* ... critical opinion is divided on the 5-hour, 2-part marathon movie which was featured in Cannes' Director's Fortnight this year.

A perplexing mix of critical opinions

Which one should a viewer or reader go by, wonders **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Art is hard to judge. Cinema is harder, given that it is a complete form, embracing many kinds of art, like photography, theatre, dance, music and so on. I have often seen a film which gets a top billing with a set of jurors, struggling to clinch even grace marks with another. So is what happens with critics. While one reviewer may decorate a movie with all the stars at his disposal, another may just about rip it apart.

Over the decades I have written on cinema, I have often wondered about the confusion that vastly differing reviews would cause in a reader. With audiences now keyed into reading a review before deciding what to see (and what not to, the steep admission rates cutting down cinema visits) — certainly in bigger towns and cities — and, more importantly, with the Internet transporting

comments and views from the world over to your desk at the mere touch of a key, there is bound to be sheer perplexity in one's head.

Although there is no denying the fact that views especially on art are more likely to be diverse, I have never ceased to wonder about this issue. Let us take Anurag Kashyap's latest movie on the Indian coal mafia, *Gangs of Wasseypur*, made in two parts. Both premiered at the Directors' Fortnight, which runs along with the Cannes Film Festival every May.

However, Kashyap released only part one in theatres last week. The sequel or the second part will follow probably in November.

I am going to quote extensively from the reviews in *The Hollywood Reporter* (whose Deborah Young had the chance to see both parts together at Cannes), *The Hindu* and in the Firstpost news website (by me).

Here is what Young had to say: "An extraordinary ride through Bollywood's spectacular, over-the-top filmmaking, *Gangs of Wasseypur* puts Tarantino in a corner with its cool command of cinematically-inspired and referenced violence, ironic characters and breathless pace. All of this bodes well for cross-over audiences in the West. Split into two parts, as it will be released in India, this epic gangster story spanning 70 years of history clocks in at more than five hours of smartly shot and edited footage, making it extremely difficult to release outside cult and midnight venues. Its bow in Cannes' Directors Fortnight met with rousing consensus, but it's still an exotic taste at a delirious length.

"Tipping his hat to Scorsese, Sergio Leone and world cinema as well as paying homage to Bollywood, writer-director-producer Anurag Kashyap (*Black Friday*) fashions a kind of "Once Upon a Time in Bengal" (or Jharkhand?), a piece of violent entertainment that never seems to run out of invention or bullets. Less successful is the screenwriters' attempt to embed the tale in a historical and political context, which simply doesn't have room to emerge amid all the mayhem. Though the testosterone level is pumped to the max, there's still room for funny jokes, fooling around and vibrant film characters that spring to life with mythical deeds and single-minded passions. No moralising or regrets trouble their consciences, nor are they likely to bother the young male demographic that will account for the lion's share of the audience.

"Kashyap, whose reputation as a screenwriter and controversial director reach a culmination in this film, is the real behind-the-scenes godfather, never losing control over the story-telling or hundreds of actors, and allowing tongue-in-cheek diversions in the second half that confirm his command over the sprawling material. In the spirit of Bollywood, Rajiv Ravi's lensing is fast on its feet, with a continually moving camera that always seems to be in the right spot to capture the action".

Now comes Sudhish Kamath's review in *The Hindu* newspaper. "Good filmmaking doesn't always translate to good storytelling. While every frame here is so passionately put together (cinematography by Rajeev Ravi and edited by Shweta Venkat Mathew), supremely performed with brilliantly conceived moments of quirk, the whole just doesn't come together as a cohesive story.

"*Gangs of Wasseypur* is a trip, no doubt. A trip to nowhere, one most enjoyed if you are an Anurag Kashyap fan. You buy a ticket to Wasseypur, you meet colourful, gun-toting, expletive-spewing, sex maniacs on the way and share a couple of laughs, amused by their choice of language till the buffoonery gets repetitive. After a long, bumpy ride through every other busy bylane close to where you boarded from, the driver leaves you stranded on a highway with a note: 'Next bus to Wasseypur in three months.'

"You paid to watch revenge. What you get is a guy doing everything else except that. Unfortunately, most of us still consume films as stories and as far as stories go, *Wasseypur Part I* is a non-starter, a deceitful film that delivers none of the promise of that revenge. All talk, no walk.

"It's all backdrop, backdrop, backdrop spelt out all through... and even that backdrop of coal mining is not convincing,

as the film pretends to be a documentary on the subject with archival footage that does nothing to the narrative except prolong it with endless voiceover.

"Voiceover here isn't used to help you settle in, it's the thread and glue that holds the loosely arranged pieces together, a character who returns to keep us in the loop, as bursts of superimposed text to illustrate timelines and character names are slapped on the screen, every few minutes. Show, tell and text on top!

"Here, coal is substituted with coolth... All that coolth and pop realism may do well with the diehard Kashyap cult but for the rest of us who paid to watch a bloody saga of revenge, it seems like a long wait at the circus."

Now for my views (and I saw both parts at Cannes): "Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur* is an epic story of coal mafia littered with bullet-ridden bodies and bathed in blood. Over five hours long and divided into two parts, the first segment opens theatrically today with the sequel to follow at the end of this year.

"The movie is Tarantino-esque (one writer called it a Bihari take on Tarantino!) with stylised sadism, rustic rivalry, gory greed and raw revenge. Well-fleshed out characters add to the pulsating energy and pace of the narrative, and arguably Kashyap's best work since his first feature, *Black Friday* (*Paanch* made even earlier in 2003 remains in the cans), *Gangs of Wasseypur* did receive a rousing reception at the French Riviera. But at home, it could end up more like a cult film, attracting only those who seek outlandish violence, and alienating the women.

"The story travels over several decades with every turn producing a sense of intense thrill. But rooted in this often frighteningly bitter journey are moments of delightful wit and burning sexual passion. Kashyap's characters are not troubled by guilt or moral righteousness, obsessed as they are with rancour and rivalry. The enmity, though, is not between different religions, but between Muslims and Muslims, who have fought for generations. The cause is not sectarian, but avarice and the mad desire to control the coal belt in Wasseypur, Jharkhand.

"Laced with black comedy and supported by superb performances (Mano) Bajpayee among the lot is marvellous as the revolver-toting thug), the plot begins dramatically, though rather confusingly with an overload of information and names that foxed even a seasoned critic like me, well versed in Hindi. It takes an hour for the dust to settle down, and the picture to emerge from the haze.

"The final scenes in the second part are somewhat predictable, but the script on the whole engages, swinging between nauseating carnage and clear comedy. "In Wasseypur", goes one line, "even the pigeons fly with one wing, because they need the other to cover their ****". Kashyap, who has co-written the movie, makes an effort — and largely succeeds — to let us taste a bit of beauty in an essentially bloody canvas. As bullets fly and men collapse, as death defies life, *Gangs of Wasseypur* effortlessly weaves magical melody into this mayhem".

The poor reader may be ready by now to tear his hair apart in utter, utter despair.

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