

cinema



* While Bollywood is unabashed in showing its heroes larger than life, such as Hrithik in *Agneepath* (left), Hollywood prefers to keep viewers grounded, even when it's an Arnold Schwarzenegger film such as *The Terminator*.



* Theo Angelopoulos

Creator of stunning cinema

The celebrated Greek film director, Theo Angelopoulos, died in a road accident last Tuesday. He was 76, and was walking across a street in Piraeus, Greece when he was hit by a motorbike. The Greek master had been on his way to the location of his latest movie, *The Other Sea in Piraeus* when he died. I met Angelopoulos in 2009 when was honoured with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Mumbai Film Festival. During a long and unhurried chat with him in his palatial hotel suite, whose windows opened out to the almost ethereal sight of the setting sun in the Arabian Sea, he was brutally frank. "I walked out of Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* after just 15 minutes, because I found the movie revolting; it was a celebration of (India's) poverty, a cruel exploitation", he remarked. His words spoken softly held a strange kind of force, almost mesmeric.

Angelopoulos was born in Athens on April 17, 1935. He dabbled in many things — studied law in Athens University, went to the IDHEC Film School in Paris and found a job at the French Cinematheque, where he was a favourite of Henri Langlois, the movie archivist and cinephile.

Back home in Athens, Angelopoulos began writing film criticism before stepping behind the camera to create stunning cinema. It was in 1970 that his first feature, *Reconstruction*, was screened. In black and white, it is regarded as a milestone for two reasons: its subject (a crime of passion shown dispassionately) and its authentic approach.

His work caught world attention in 1975, when *The Travelling Players*, screened at the Cannes' Directors Fortnight.

Three-and-a-half hours long, the movie was a superb mix of Greek mythology and history told through extremely long and complex shots.

Greek mythology and history were common themes in his cinema.

His later pictures found European money for production, and renowned actors to play in them: Gian-Maria Volonte, Marcelo Mastroianni, Jeanne Moreau, Harvey Keitel, Bruno Ganz, Willem Defoe and Michel Piccoli.

Angelopoulos won many prizes: Golden Lion at Venice for the 1986 *The Beekeeper*, Grand Jury Prize for *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995, Cannes) and Golden Palm for *Eternity And A Day* (1998, Cannes).

The first two parts of his last trilogy — *The Weeping Meadow* in 2004 and *Dust and Time* in 2008 — were at Berlin. He never got around making the third segment, but instead began filming *The Other Sea in Piraeus* with Tony Servillo. Close to finishing it — on the pressing issue of illegal immigration — a voice seemed to have called "cut". He leaves behind his wife, Phoebe, and three daughters.

The critical difference

Why are Indian critics kinder towards Hollywood's over-the-top action films than their own homegrown fare?

Gautaman Bhaskaran lists his reasons

The other morning, I was surprised to get a telephone call from a radio station, Chennai Live, asking me if I could talk to them about the favoured status Indian critics grant to Hollywood cinema.

The girl at the other end wondered why the Indian media while lauding an Arnold Schwarzenegger executing humanly impossible tasks in his *Terminator* films, was critical when it came to judging a Salman Khan or a Surya performing the same sort of feats on the screen.

I was happy that Chennai Live, a station popular among the young, was starting to look at issues other than an actor's costumes or "item" numbers (read hip-wriggling, bosom heaving and pelvis thrusting dances) or tinsel town's sexual dalliances.

Both the electronic and the print media in India are mostly infatuated with the seedy, the sensational and the sexy affairs of stars. Nayanthara walking out of Prabhu Deva's life (after his much written about divorce with his wife) was the screaming story of the day, last Saturday. American actress Halle Berry's failure to stop her former boyfriend from seeing their three-year-old daughter, Nahla, figured on the top of another page. I do not remember Indian

newspapers or magazines talking about Deva's brilliant dancing skills or Berry's extraordinary performance in the 2001 *Monster's Ball*. During Rekha's heyday, I read more about her alleged (or imagined) relationship with the married Amitabh Bachchan than the actress' moving and sensitive portrayals of a wide range of characters. Hollywood star Demi Moore's younger husband made better fodder for print and people than her abilities before the camera.

So, returning to Chennai Live's newly discovered interest in discussing cinema rather than celebrities, I found, to my dismay, that the girl on the phone had begun her conversation with a firmly pre-conceived notion: Indian critics were partial or kinder to Hollywood than they were to Bollywood or Kollywood or Tollywood or... But I refused to be either led or pushed.

Many journalists decide on a line for their stories even before they switch on their recorders. They will ask only those questions which will elicit answers elaborating and affirming their point of view. Answers that contradict the line already set for a story were usually edited out for "lack of space"!

However, in all fairness to the radio girl, she let me have my say (after the initial reluctance) with the least of interruptions, and since

the show was being aired live, she had absolutely no way of censoring my views.

Well, what are they? I have always maintained that the essential difference between an average Hollywood movie and an average Indian film lie in treatment. American cinema — and of course European fare — works hard on a script that will carry the story or the narrative from point to point in a more-or-less believable manner. A lot of effort goes into authenticity.

Of course, there are movies like Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* series or the James Bond adventures, which everybody knows is sheer fantasy. Nobody in the audience could ever even remotely suppose that the characters are capable of those feats.

On the other hand, when, for example, the characters essayed by Arya and Madhavan crush tens of goons into pulp in the Tamil *Vettai* (Hunt) or a mortally wounded Hrithik Roshan's Vijay in *Agneepath* (Hindi) lifts Sanjay Dutt's huge villain high above the ground to hang him from the branch of a tree, the sense of disbelief tends to get clouded. Because Indian cinema or a lot of it, tries to push audiences into a state of belief. It wants to say that *Vettai* and *Agneepath* are not impossible.

So, while Hollywood keeps us firmly grounded, Bollywood propels

us to fly. The scripts are penned in a way that they aid this style.

But I feel that this form is often resorted to because it does not require much sweat and toil. And, a good writer is a must if the script is to be entirely convincing. With a serious dearth of such men, great stories sink into silly scripts with little attention being paid for the way a narrative unfolds. Often, it travels through a series of highly illogical and unbelievable happenings or stupid coincidences.

So, in Indian cinema, a man and woman cannot sit in a café and talk. They cannot go for a long walk locally. They have to be flown to an exotic location, and are asked to wear the fanciest of clothes and made to sing and dance. This is the way romance can be conveyed. I am still waiting for the day when I would walk into Kolkata's Victoria Memorial lawns or Delhi's Lodhi Garden or Chennai's Marina Beach and find a couple waltzing to the notes from a piano or tap dancing to the beat of drums.

Cinema, surely, cannot get so unreal. I hope the radio girl will read this for a reaffirmation of all that I aired.

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