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### How 'Festival Overload Syndrome' Affects Critics

By *DAVID STERRITT*

PLACE: the Cannes Film Festival, 2000 edition. EVENT: a new movie by Béla Tarr, the year's hottest Hungarian director. TIME: about 2:00 on the festival's next-to-last afternoon. CHARACTERS: assorted critics and scholars, arriving 30 minutes before the screening to beat the crowd.

Only there isn't any crowd. Perhaps the movie's title is to blame -- somehow, Werckmeister Harmoniak isn't quite as catchy as Nurse Betty or Cecil B. DeMented, festival hits that had people lined up long before the show. Or maybe it's the two-hour-25-minute running time, although compared with Tarr's seven-and-a-half-hour *Sátántangó*, this one clocks in as a quickie. It certainly isn't the venue, since other attractions in the popular Director's Fortnight series have drawn large audiences.

Whatever the reason, the auditorium is only two-thirds filled when the film begins. The critics and scholars are pleased with their cautious logistics, though. They've snagged the best seats in the house, and not one of the picture's 145 minutes will escape their scrutiny. Best of all, every half-empty row means fewer ordinary moviegoers to rustle candy wrappers and complain about Tarr's avant-garde cinematics.

His vision proves as avant-garde as ever. The first scene finds a young man illustrating the structure of the solar system by choreographing his friends into a cosmic dance in a neighborhood saloon. Then his mentor, an aging intellectual, gives a spirited lecture on music theory. We learn of schisms in the hero's family, political rivalries in his community, and tensions generated by a demagogue who's traveling through the countryside with a mysterious circus. All of this is passionately acted, rich with

metaphorical implications, and photographed in the astonishingly long, fluid shots that have elevated Tarr to the highest levels of the auteurist pantheon.

Surely the critics and scholars are squirming with excitement. Or surely they would be if they were awake. But such is not the case at this eagerly anticipated highlight of the world's greatest film festival. One cineaste conks out 25 minutes into the story, around the time of the musicology speech. Another falls asleep a little earlier, regains consciousness long enough to hear about the village's flirtation with fascism, then succumbs once more. Another flees the theater at the half-hour mark, mumbling that he's slept through the past 20 minutes and no longer has any idea what's going on.

Other members of the group (including this writer, well fortified with espresso before the lights went down) stay alert until the finale and applaud Tarr's visionary achievement at its conclusion. They also feel sympathy for their colleagues, who have missed one of the most brilliantly realized works in the entire Cannes program -- and one that won't be easy to catch up with afterward, given the odds against something called *Werckmeister Harmoniak* arriving at anyone's local multiplex.

There's no mistaking the culprit in this situation: the dreaded Festival Overload Syndrome, which grows in power with every movie-crowded day and can conquer all but the most hopelessly obsessive viewer unless vigorous precautions (see "espresso," above) are taken.

Even the most seasoned critics are vulnerable to F.O.S., as the Tarr screening showed. (In fact, *Werckmeister Harmoniak* is less esoteric than some of Tarr's previous work, as *Variety* indicated by giving it a glowing review under a headline that only the venerable trade newspaper could have come up with: "Magyar maverick's moving meditation.") I describe the scene not to belittle my colleagues, but to illustrate the differences between the way experts see many films and the way everyday moviegoers see them.

Becoming a responsible critic means cultivating a deep knowledge of film history and a broad awareness of current international developments in the medium. While some critics attempt to stay informed through reading books and viewing videos, most feel compelled to see as many significant works as possible in the way their creators meant them to be experienced -- as reels of 35-millimeter celluloid projected onto a wall-sized screen in a public place. Since movies that won't sell many tickets aren't shown in many theaters, serious filmgoers are forced to risk F.O.S. when festivals, museums, university programs, and other such venues make high concentrations of Important Cinema available on an all-too-fleeting basis.

Does this matter to civilian moviegoers who run no risk of overdosing but just want to see a good picture on a Saturday night? It certainly does, because critics are more than tastemakers -- they're program shapers as well. Their influence affects which films will move to commercial screens, where a wider range of viewers can discover them. Movies that are enthusiastically received at specialized events have the best chance of attracting bids from distributors and exhibitors. The technical term for this enthusiasm is "buzz," and it's as evanescent and indefinable as its name. All that's certain is that it rarely attaches itself to films that critics have slumbered through -- even though a somnolent reception may be less the fault of the movie than of its unfortunate time slot near the end of a fatiguing festival. By the time they arrived at Werckmeister Harmoniak, the critics at Cannes may have seen part or all of dozens of films during the event's previous 10 days.

Critics who don't view a film at a festival are nonetheless likely to see it under offbeat circumstances. In that situation, the experience-warping factor isn't overload but conscious engineering by studio publicity departments, which do their best to ensure particular conditions that will induce particular responses.

By and large, critics in New York and other major cities see movies in prerelease screenings arranged by the studio or distribution company. These events come in two flavors. One is the Dignified

Private Screening, held in a small auditorium that's a miniversion of a real movie theater -- minus crowds, popcorn, and other distractions that serious film buffs dislike. The other is the Cattle Call Screening, held in a regular theater with a few rows roped off for critics -- ensuring them a free ticket and a decent seat, but otherwise treating them like the Regular People who surround them in the darkened hall.

Not surprisingly, most critics prefer Dignified Private Screenings, which allow them to commune with the screen and a few colleagues -- and perhaps with their dreams, if they're still exhausted from the last festival they attended -- with a minimum of exposure to the outside world. Eager to please these pundits, whose responses may affect ticket sales, studios are often happy to provide such previews.

But not always. Distributors consider certain films to be "audience pictures," which must be seen in the company of Actual Human Beings to be fully savored. On these occasions, even the most cultivated critics find themselves herded into cavernous movie palaces, where the disembodied giggles and groans of fellow spectators presumably guide them to a proper understanding of the fare on display. Critics protest such treatment from time to time, contending that they can tell whether a film is funny without being surrounded by a mob of chortling strangers. But their complaints have little effect. Many comedies, horror movies, and adventure epics are handled in this way, as are pictures aimed at children or teenagers.

A reviewer I know recalls seeing the 1986 hit *Top Gun* at a Los Angeles studio, in a screening room that contained a dozen critics until five minutes before the film started -- whereupon a bus pulled up to the door and disgorged about 50 teenage girls, invited for the occasion. Their vocal appreciation of Tom Cruise's attributes lent the proceeding a distinctive tone, which my colleague has never forgotten.

As irresistible as it is to mock such studio antics, screenings of this ilk can benefit critics or scholars who might not otherwise realize how a commercial film is likely to be received by the intended

market sector, whether identified by age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or economic status. A white critic may learn as much about an Eddie Murphy vehicle by witnessing the response of an African-American audience, for example, as by attentively viewing the movie on the screen. In such cases, the distributor has done a favor for critics, eventual readers of their reviews, and the film community at large, however mercenary the motives for the "special screening arrangements" may have been.

It would be a boon if festival organizers could invent an antidote to Festival Overload Syndrome and its symptoms. Critical opinions are not all that reliable even under the best of circumstances, of course; pundits chronically disagree with one another, and occasionally with themselves upon different viewings of a single film. But along with their opinions, they bring background knowledge, historical awareness, and contextual information to their readers and students. These intellectual benefits will be generated most productively by experts who encounter the objects of their study under conditions that encourage a full measure of sensory alertness and mental agility.

By and large, film critics and scholars are among the most responsible professionals I know, aware of and grateful for their privileged access to the most exciting art form of our time. Still, those who read and study their analyses would do well to remember the trying conditions under which these writers do some of their most important work -- conditions that may vary greatly from those the everyday moviegoer is familiar with. Be the matter at hand Werckmeister Harmoniak or the latest Star Wars epic, it's best illuminated by specialists whose eyes aren't wide shut.

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