Beasts of No Nation: Crash Course Film Criticism #14

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=1xURt0maugI
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/1xURt0maugI

There are movies about war.

And there are movies about kids. But the movies about war starring kids are more rare.

Some are science fiction, like 2013's Ender's Game. Others follow children trying to survive during wartime, movies like Stephen Spielberg's Empire of the Sun starring a young Christian Bale. Or John Boorman's semi-autobiographical Hope and Glory about growing up in London during the Blitz.

But even fewer films are about children who actually participate in war, like a 2015 movie that tackled the real-life issue of child soldiers. From its gritty, handheld camerawork, to its charismatic leading performances, this grueling drama is a masterclass in intensely vibrant and subjective cinema. Let's dig into Beasts of No Nation. [Intro Music] Beasts of No Nation was a dream project for writer-director Cary Fukunaga.

He was fresh off two acclaimed features – 2009's Sin Nombre and the 2011 big screen adaptation of Jane Eyre – as well as his stunning direction of the first season of True Detective. So Fukunaga was able to cobble together a tiny budget and haul a crew into the jungles of Ghana to do the near impossible. Based on the 2005 novel by Nigerian-American author Uzodinma Iweala Beasts of No Nation takes place in a fictional, nameless, African country torn apart by civil war.

Various rebel factions battle the military and each other for control of the nation, wreaking havoc, slaughtering civilians, and leaving behind a wake of misery. The story follows a young boy named Agu, played with incredible focus by Ghanaian actor Abraham Attah. Agu lives with his family in what's called the "buffer zone," a protected safe haven guarded by the United Nations.

His life isn't easy, but he's sheltered from the worst parts of the conflict and allowed to maintain a pretty recognizable childhood. He plays with friends, jokes with his older brother, and does chores for his family. That all changes when the government falls and the war comes to his doorstep.

Almost overnight, Agu's family is split apart and his father and older brother are shot in front of his eyes. Agu barely escapes into the vast jungle, where he's captured by a battalion of the National Defense Forces. The NDF is a ragtag rebel group made up of young men and boys, led by a brutal, charismatic man they call the Commandant The Commandant: What is this thing doing here?

The Commandant: Who is responsible for bringing this thing? In a searing performance, Idris Elba inhabits the role of the barbaric, yet fatherly leader who specializes in indoctrinating child soldiers. The Commandant: Now what are they calling you?

Agu: Agu... The Commandant: Oh, you must say it like you are prouder.

Agu: Agu. The Commandant: One more time.

Agu: Agu! The Commandant: Well, Agu. That is what I'll be calling you, then. Under the Commandant's direction, Agu endures an initiation process that includes killing a captive man with a machete. And he's forced to submit to the Commandant's predatory sexual assault. From there, Agu and his fellow NDF soldiers follow the Commandant across the country, causing destruction and taking over towns, until they're called to the rebel capital and the Commandant is demoted. This begins a downward slide that ends with most of the child soldiers dead and the rest abandoning the Commandant after he and Agu hold each other at gunpoint. Rescued by UN peacekeepers, Agu and the other children wind up in a coastal rehabilitation school, struggling to recognize their own humanity and recover some sliver of their childhood. It's an incredibly harrowing story, filled with both darkness and violence. And Fukunaga's skill with the language of cinema makes it a mesmerizing film. From the opening shot, Fukunaga makes a nod to the fact that what we're watching is an illusion. That no matter how hard it may be to watch, it pales in comparison to real life. The film opens with a shot of young African boys playing soccer in a field. The camera pulls back through an empty television set. And that TV re-frames the game, presenting it as if it's happening on a screen. Just like the film we're watching! This device, the empty TV set, then becomes an instrument of the plot used to reveal character. Agu and his buddies try to sell it as "imagination TV." They set it up for the local guards and act out various shows on the other side. It sets Agu up as resourceful, bright, and funny – all qualities that will be tested by the trials of the story to come. Writer-director Fukunaga, who also acts as his own cinematographer, uses all the tools of cinema to put us in the perspective of his young protagonist. Many of the shots, especially early in the film, are framed from low angles. Agu looks up to his father, his older brother, and eventually to the Commandant. And so do we. The opening scenes have a vaguely gauzy look, presenting much of Agu's home life like a traditional coming-of-age drama – from the pranks with his brother and the family dinner, to a celebratory church service. The film is patient with these scenes. Fukunaga and his editors, Pete Beaudreau and Mikkel E. G. Nielsen, give us time to explore Agu's life, his community, and his deep connections to his family. Just like Agu, we're lulled into a false sense of security by the look, feel, and pacing of these early scenes. But that's all about to change. Once the war decimates the village, Fukunaga turns to much more brutal, jarring, and unpredictable techniques to tell the story, which perfectly mirrors Agu's experience. The cinematography style becomes more aggressively handheld, capturing the chaos of the violence. The editing becomes faster too, as Agu first encounters the shock of war. Through it all, Fukunaga keeps the focus on Agu and his point of view. We get close-up after close-up of the boy's face, followed by shots of what he's looking at. This classic example of the Kuleshov effect keeps us tracking his emotions, even as the camera becomes more frenzied. But that's not the only trick up Fukunaga's sleeve. He uses extreme wide shots to help us dive into Agu's perspective too. Once Agu escapes from the village and finds himself deep in the jungle, Fukunaga frames him in extremely wide shots. This presents Agu as a tiny dot in a vast, dangerous world, emphasizing his insignificance and vulnerability. His life has been wrenched out of the comfort of a community and a home, and suddenly becomes extremely precarious. Most of the middle of the film is shot in a realist style, with natural lighting, handheld camerawork, and diegetic sound, or sound whose source exists within the world of the film. And the effect of this realist style is one of immediacy – we feel the intensity of each second along with Agu. As he's captured by the NDF troops, comes face to face with the Commandant, and becomes one of many child soldiers, he's forced to live in the moment. And the moment is often unfamiliar and terrifying. Violence, or the threat of violence, fills every scene and lurks after each pan or cut. And we are right there with him. Occasionally, though, Fukunaga breaks this realism to illustrate a big emotional turning point. One instance of this comes after the rebels take down a convoy of military trucks, and the Commandant decides to complete Agu's initiation ritual. Agu, who's been carrying ammunition for the troops, is called over. And the Commandant orders him to take the life of the last remaining enemy. The man is bound, on his knees, begging for his life. The Commandant gives Agu a machete and talks about how hard he'll have to swing it to split the man's head open. Fukunaga extends the moment, drawing out the suspense, as the Commandant urges Agu on and the other soldiers watch in silence. The film cuts back and forth between increasingly zoomed-in close-ups of Agu, and a medium close-up of the captured soldier. When Agu finally swings his machete, the film

goes quiet for a split second. Then one of Agu's fellow child soldiers, a boy named Strika, steps forward. He swings his own machete, and joins Agu as they chop the man to death. At this point, the film moves into slow motion, and Fukunaga cuts out most of the diegetic sound, replacing it with an echoey, low rumble. This droning sound crescendos as Agu swings his machete. The camera keeps the boys in frame, with the Commandant in the background, focusing on their expressionless faces, rather than the gore at their feet. This whole sequence has the effect of drawing us into Agu's intense personal decision. It helps us feel how he's dissociating from the violent act to preserve his sanity. Fukunaga uses this heightened reality to let us absorb the brutality of Agu's actions and understand their emotional significance. And Fukunaga takes a different approach to a very similar moment later in the film. When the rebels seize control of an enemy city, Agu and a small group of child soldiers are clearing a building when they discover a woman and her two small children hiding in a wardrobe. Beaten down by the violence he's been forced to both witness and commit, Agu mistakes the woman for his mother, cries out, and clings to her. When he discovers his mistake, he reels, crossing into the next room where Strika is beating one of the captured children. And then he turns back into the main room and shoots the woman. It's an intense, psychologically fraught sequence. Agu's reality warps and he responds with the tool he's been taught to use over and over again: an act of violence. But rather than film it in a traditional way, by cutting up the sequence, Fukunaga chooses to trap us in the moment with Agu by making it a continuous steadicam shot. The camera tracks Agu through the entire scene, in and out of the rooms, as he begins to crack under the pressure that's been building up since his own village was destroyed. And because the shot never cuts, we feel trapped too. Just like him, we're unable to look away from the horrors of war, with its many different forms of violence. Another thing to consider when analyzing Beasts of No Nation is the score by Dan Romer. Much like another war movie we discussed, Apocalypse Now, there are times when the score starts to feel like something from a science fiction film. It's subtle, but powerful in making scenes and shots feel otherworldly, like Agu is lost and far away from home. Like this isn't even his version of Earth. It can make us feel like we're seeing a parallel version of Agu – like we're seeing an alternate, dark timeline. And in fact, while the film draws heavily on real-life experiences of child soldiers, it's deliberately set in an unnamed, fictional African country. So in a way, this actually is another world! The film takes on a new language in the final scenes, too, once Agu has freed himself from the Commandant and been rescued by the UN troops. At the coastal rehabilitation school, the filming style settles down. Fukunaga uses much less handheld camerawork, and the shots last longer. Stylistically, the film becomes more stable, just like Agu's world. He has fresh clothes, plenty of food, an education, and no one pushing him to fight or kill. And yet, he spends time apart from others, watching the other former child soldiers running into the surf and horse-playing on the beach. In one devastating scene, an aid worker questions Agu about his experiences. She wants him to begin to articulate what happened in hopes that he can work his way through it all psychologically intact. When we met Agu in the opening scenes, he was an expressive, clever, often joyful boy. This Agu is stone-faced, hardened, and cut off from his own emotions. He doesn't even come close to smiling. Eventually, he's able to open up just a little bit, tears hovering in his eyes.

Agu: If I'm telling this to you.

Agu: You will think that...

Agu:... I am some sort of beast.

Agu: Or devil. We get the sense that he has a long way to go, but also that this might be the first step to recovery. The final shot shows Agu racing into the ocean with the other boys, chasing and splashing, and maybe – just maybe – reclaiming a small fraction of the childhood that had been stolen from him. Beasts of No Nation can be a tough movie to watch, but, in a way, it's also a deeply compassionate one. Director Cary Fukunaga's deep grasp of the tools of cinema keep us anchored in his main character's perspective in a really artful way. And the grueling journey makes the sliver of hope at the end all the more powerful. Next time, we'll tackle apes, monoliths, and a deadly computer in one of the most influential science fiction films ever made, Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. Crash Course Film Criticism is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. You can head over to their channel to check out a playlist of their latest amazing shows, like Origin of Everything, Physics Girl, and ACS Reactions. This episode of Crash Course was filmed in the Doctor Cheryl C. Kinney Crash Course Studio with the help of these fabulous people and our amazing graphics team is Thought Cafe.