World Cinema - Part 1: Crash Course Film History #14

Crash Course: Film History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=mpQrcxfNl-o
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/mpQrcxfNl-o

News flash! The world's a big place. What? Huh! And humans have been making films in almost every corner of it for more than a hundred years. While Hollywood dominated the global film market in its first six or seven decades, lots of profoundly influential film movements arose all over the world.

Now, there's way too much to cover in just two videos, but hopefully these overviews will inspire you to explore more on your own. To start, let's look at a few key movements and filmmakers throughout Asia that were born out of intense political change and had a lasting impact on world cinema.

Crash Course: Film History theme

During the 1930's, the Japanese government placed stringent controls over domestic film production through its Ministry of Propaganda. They censored content that didn't uphold the values of the Imperial government, and promoted movies that celebrated the Japanese military.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Ministry of Propaganda borrowed a page from the Nazi playbook and actually took over the country's ten largest film studios. Then, they consolidated these studios into two main production companies and forced them to make pro-war movies. Now, real battle footage from the Pacific was hard to come by, so these wartime Japanese filmmakers got really good at creating special effects. That experience would come in handy after the war when they were given more artistic freedom.

Yasujiro Ozu is widely acknowledged as one of the masters of Classical Japanese cinema, a period that stretched from 1926 to the 1950's. Ozu began his career making quiet, humanistic films about family relationships and inter-generational conflicts. He grew up admiring American studio films, especially those by Ernst Lubitsch and D.W. Griffith.

Ozu's first film to achieve wide acclaim was a comedy called *I Was Born, But....* The film follows a pair of brothers who lose faith in their father when they discover he's not standing up to his boss. A lot of Ozu movies embed this kind of gentle social critique into their very personal stories.

Aesthetically, Ozu is known for his long, wide shots that allow entire scenes to play out, sometimes very slowly. This is often considered to be a reflection of the power of ritual in traditional Japanese life. He also innovated the use of off-screen space, having characters exit the frame for surprisingly long periods of time and letting the camera linger on the now empty space.

These moments echo certain Zen aesthetics about emptiness and patience. And they root Ozu's films in ancient Japanese customs and beliefs, even though his stories take place in what was then present day.

After the war, Ozu went on to make three masterpieces: *Late Spring*, *Early Summer*, and his most famous film, *Tokyo Story.* Now, the end of the War brought profound changes to the Japanese film industry. Much of the country was scarred, both physically and psychologically, having suffered a massive firebombing campaign and atomic explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

One kind of postwar Japanese cinema dealt with the aftermath of these atomic bombs in very direct, explicit ways. It's impossible to watch Ishiro Honda's 1954 film *Godzilla* and not see the parable underneath the sci-fi monster movie. And also not try to mimic Godzilla's noise: raaagh, raaagh! No, I'm not doing a very good job.

The creature is unleashed by careless atomic explosions, and the human characters spend the movie wrestling with the potentially apocalyptic consequences of scientific research. *Godzilla* and its sequels also show off the sophistication of the Japanese special effects industry, as all that work during the war was now beginning to pay off.

After the war, General Douglas MacArthur led the American occupation forces, which oversaw the democratization of Japan from 1945 to 1952. And this brought a new kind of censorship to Japanese films; they were forbidden from glorifying imperialism, feudalism, and militarism. The occupation forces rounded up and destroyed hundreds of films that were deemed anti-democratic.

Under the occupation, the state-run film companies were broken up to foster competition, and filmmakers were encouraged to make movies that celebrated democratic values and personal freedoms. One filmmaker who flourished in this postwar period was Akira Kurosawa, who would go on to become one of the most influential filmmakers in the history of cinema. For real. He's a big deal.

Kurosawa became an international star with his 1951 revolutionary film *Rashomon.* It tells the story of the murder of a samurai warrior through the eyes of four unreliable narrators. We see the events of the film four times, each time from a different point of view, and the film never tells us which version of events actually happened.

Kurosawa seemed to imply that truth and reality are subjective in both cinema and life, and that our only hope is to be as good to one another as we possibly can. Yeah, Nick!

Unlike Ozu, Kirosawa kept his camera moving, a style he would bring to many of his later samurai films. And he was often borrowing stories from other cultures. His samurai movie *Yojimbo* was based on an American detective novel by Dashiell Hammett. *Throne of Blood* was a Japanese retelling of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and he used *King Lear* as the basis for a samurai epic *Ran.*

In turn, Kirosawa inspired many foreign films based on his work. George Lucas famously lifted elements from Kirosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* for his first *Star Wars* film, and Kirosawa's masterpiece *Seven Samurai* has been remade twice in the United States as *The Magnificent Seven.* I guess that would make them *The Magnificent Fourteen*. Ha.

From anime to horror and period dramas to Kaiju films, stories from the Japanese movie industry continue to resonate around the globe. Now, in mainland China the film industry also underwent some significant changes because of political pressures. The first domestic films emerged in 1905, and within five years a stable industry began forming, starting in Shanghai and spreading to other coastal cities.

Sound was introduced in 1929 and China's film industry continued to grow until the Japanese invaded in 1937, occupied Shanghai, and shut down domestic production until the end of the War. When Mao Zedong's Communist Party took over the country in 1949, they placed the control of film production under the Minister of Culture. During the 1950's, the Chinese government built a dozen major film studios throughout the country and produced a lot of pro-Communist films.

In the early 1960's, the government sensors relaxed enough to allow film adaptations of several operas and novels. Before this, works like Su Li's *Third Sister Liu* and *Early Spring in February* by Xie Tieli would have been considered too bourgeois to produce.

Then in 1966 came the Cultural Revolution, a violent decade-long purge of most cultural and economic institutions in China. Professionals of all kinds, including filmmakers, were driven from

their jobs and homes by the Chinese government and sent off to be "reeducated" in the countryside.

As a result, film production came to a halt in 1967 and wouldn't resume for another three years. And even then, only amateur filmmakers were allowed to make movies at first. Eventually, through fits and starts, professional filmmakers emerged from their reeducation camps or graduated from new film schools and began making movies again.

One of the most notable directors from mainland China is Zhang Yimou. His first film, the beautifully shot *Red Sorghum,* won the top prize at the Berlin Film Festival in 1987. Known for his striking visuals and painterly style, Zhang made several notable martial arts films in the early 2000's, movies like *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, before overseeing the opening ceremonies for the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

Zhang has even worked with American movie stars. Matt Damon and Willem Dafoe play lead roles in the 2017 film *The Great Wall.* This collaboration may be the first of many, since well-financed Chinese production companies have begun to partner with American studios to make films for audiences in both countries and beyond.

Outside of mainland China, Hong Kong has a long tradition of Kung Fu and swordplay films. I Kung Fu'd the eagle just now. Hong Kong's film industry elevated these violent genres to art in the 1960's and 70's through precisely choreographed action and rapid editing.

Figures like Bruce Lee and Jacke Chan popularized this authentic martial arts cinema outside Hong Kong, and directors like John Woo even went on to make blockbusters within the American studio system, films like *Face Off* and *Mission Impossible 2*. Wong Kar-Wai is another superstar director from the Hong Kong film industry. His elliptical post modern films often examine unrequited love and the deep interior lives of their characters. From the dream like lyricism of *In the Mood for Love* to the marital arts grandeur of *The Grand Master*, his films have had a profound influence on filmmakers throughout the world.

As big as China and Hong Kong loom in the world stage, the largest film industry in the world is located in India. All told, the country produces eight to nine hundred movies a year, roughly a quarter of the worlds films. So India had a growing film industry under British colonial rule in the early part of the twentieth century, prior to winning their independence. They ran into trouble, though, when sound film arrived because India makes films in more than sixteen languages. When you hear the term Bollywood, for instance, that refers to film production centered in Bombay. these Hindi language films make up twenty five percent of Indian cinema. Bengali language film production occurs mostly in Calcutta, while facilities in Madras produce Tamil, Kannada, or Telegu language films.

Dispite the language differences, what unifies most Indian films is their style. Most Indian cinema consists of lavish musicals or mythological romances, all following relatively strict formulas. For the musicals, the saying goes "All you need is a star, six songs, and three dances". The Indian star system actually resembles the American studio era of the 1930's. Actors are chosen and groomed by the film studios, and plugged into movies built around their personas. The most profitable movie ever produced in India is Ramesh Sippy's 1975 movie, *Sholay*. It's an action adventure film heavily influences by Hollywood westerns but also has its share of over the top song and dance numbers. The film was so popular when it was released that it ran continuously in movie theatres for five years! I can't even hold a job that long.

Meanwhile the universally acknowledged master of Indian cinema was Satyajit Ray, whose style was different than most Indian films. After studying as a painter, Ray found his filmmaking inspiration in Italian neo-realism, especially Vittorio De Sica's classic *The Bicycle Thieves*, an intimate story of a father and son struggling to survive poverty in post war Italy. In 1955 Ray made his first film, *The Song of the Road*, which tells the story of a young Bengali boy coming of age. Unlike the spectacle of most Indian cinema, Ray's film focuses on the emotions of its fully realized characters, and intimate moments of everyday life. The film became a surprise international hit and won the Jury prize at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival. In his next two films, 1957's *The Unvanqushed* and 1959's *The World of Apu*, Ray continued to follow the main character from his first film as he matured into adolescence. These three films together are known as *The Apu Trilogy* and cemented Ray's international reputation and low-key contemplative style.

Indian cinema is more than just fun Bollywood spectacles, it's a multi-faceted film industry that, along with all these Asian film cultures has profoundly shaped modern filmmaking today and for generations to come. Today we talked about post-war Japanese cinema from Kirosawa's *Samauri* to Honda's *Godzilla,* we scratched the surface of Chinese cinema from mainland epics to the martial arts film traditions of Hong Kong, and we looked at India home of the largest film industry in the world. Next time we'll tackle Indigenous cinema from Africa and Latin America to maverick filmmakers in the Middle East.

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