Independent Cinema: Crash Course Film History #12

Crash Course: Film History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=opQC45irmN8
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/opQC45irmN8

===== Introduction (0:00) =====

What's playing at the multiplex today? Another big-budget sequel? The same old romantic comedy? Yet another superhero movie? Probably that last one. A lot of the time, Hollywood is driven by trends. The success of one film or genre inspires others to jump on the bandwagon. And that's how we end up with nothing but reboots and dystopian fantasies.

The same thing happened after World War II. Audiences around the globe were getting tired of the films coming out of Hollywood, calling them artificial, self-important, and inauthentic. From the Italians in the 1940s to the French in the 1960s, and even independent directors at work today, filmmakers have found ways to challenge the classical Hollywood model by creating their own vibrant and original films.

So let's talk about Italian Neo-Realism, the French New Wave, and all kinds of independent cinema. Are we going to talk about Sharknado, Nick? (Nick, off-camera: No.) Okay good!

[opening music plays]

===== Italian Neo-Realism (0:58) =====

Between the 1930s and the 1950s, the major American film studios perfected a particular style of filmmaking we call classical Hollywood cinema. Their stories were chaste, formulaic, and mostly upbeat. The good guys almost always won, and husbands and wives couldn't even share a bed. Many of the films were shot on constructed sets or the studio's back lot. And most used a flat, generic form of lighting called high key lighting that ensured the entire image was clearly visible. A lot of great films came out of the studio system, but Hollywood was churning out between six- and eight-hundred films a year and dominating the global film market. By the mid-1940s, audiences were ready for something new.

The first post-World War II movement to find its voice was Italian Neo-Realism. Many of its filmmakers, like Robert Rossellini and Vittorio de Sica, were working directors before the war and started shooting again as soon as the fighting ended. After living through that violent time, they craved a more raw and authentic style than classical Hollywood cinema could provide.

Filmmaking tools for these guys ran thin: Cinecittà, the film studio in Rome, was nearly destroyed during the war, equipment was often damaged or missing, and film stock was hard to come by. But these resourceful Italian filmmakers found a way to turn these disadvantages into a style that reflected the harsh reality that saw around them.

The first Italian Neo-Realist film was Roberto Rossellini's 1945 masterpiece *Rome: Open City*. Set and shot in the Italian capital just after the end of the war, the film tells the tragic story of a handful of characters living under Nazi occupation. Rossellini mixed non-actors with movie stars and filmed in and around buildings that had actually been bombed. The film has an extremely rough look, a plot that meanders from character to character, unexpected and shocking deaths, and an ambiguous ending. Nothing about this film screams "classical Hollywood," and that's what helped turn it into a hit. Other Italian Neo-Realists followed Rossellini's example, focusing on stories that tried to reveal the authentic suffering of everyday people.

===== French New Wave (2:33) =====

Then, nearly two decades later, another film movement would take a different approach to the same problem: how do you make more authentic, irreverent movies than Hollywood? In the late 1950s in France, a group of opinionated young film lovers started writing for a movie magazine called *Cahiers du cinema*. At the time, the mainstream French film industry was making a lot of unimaginative literary adaptations that mimicked the classical Hollywood style. Films like Jean Delannoy's *The Little Rebels* and Rene Clement's war drama *Forbidden Games*.

And these young film critics hated them. In 1959, one of their most prominent writers, Jean-Luc Godard, wrote a scathing attack on 21 major French directors. Here's just part of what he said: "Your camera movements are ugly because your subjects are bad, your casts act badly because your dialogue is worthless; in a word, you don't know how to create cinema, because you no longer know what it is."

Ouch.

The main argument of these critics was that the studio systems - in both the United States and France - were spoon-feeding their audiences rather than respecting their intelligence. Interestingly, some of the filmmakers these critics admired had worked in Hollywood during the height of this studio system: directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks, Orson Welles, and Alfred Hitchcock. And this was even before Hitchcock was Hitchcock. At the time, he was considered a reliable filmmaker of commercial thrillers. Successful, sure, but not a genius.

These young French film critics, however, saw a filmmaker entirely in command of his medium - from story to cinematography to editing. They also admired a few contemporary French filmmakers, people like Alain Resnais Angès Varda. Varda's work, particularly her use of non-professional actors, documentary realism, and real-life locations, demonstrated that a vital, refreshing French cinema was possible.

By the end of the 1950s, they had analyzed a boatload of contemporary cinema, and were ready to start making films of their own. In 1959, four of them made their feature film directing debuts: Jean-Luc Godard shot *Breathless*, Jacques Rivette made *Paris Belongs to Us*, Claude Chabrol made his second film *Les Cousins*, and François Truffart directed *The 400 Blows*. Truffaut's film was selected to screen at the hugely prestigious Cannes Film Festival, where Truffaut won Best Director. Suddenly, these scrappy young critics were being recognized as major international film stars, and it put French New Wave on the map.

This style involved making films swiftly with minimal crews and lightweight equipment. Like WheezyWaiter...actually no crew for Wheezy Waiter. Advances in camera technology, along with faster film stocks, allowed them to shoot with available or natural lighting, instead of hauling around lights. The films' plots often felt spontaneous and absurd, featuring tangents, casual and irreverent humor, a frank approach to sexuality, and sometimes obscure cinematic references and in-jokes. French the Llama, that's neat!

They used lots of tricks to remind audiences they were watching a movie, to really play with that illusion of reality - things like jump-cuts or characters talking directly to the camera. Like WheezyWaiter. But their goal was to capture something really authentic about life in post-war Europe. And even though the Italian Neo-Realism and French New Wave styles got fancy names, this shift wasn't just happening in two countries.

===== The Rise of New Hollywood Cinema (5:11) =====

New generations of filmmakers began challenging the classical Hollywood style all over the world, from similar "New Waves" in Brazil, England, and Spain, to post-War Japanese cinema. and the rise of post-colonial Third Cinema movements in Africa and South

America. In a couple episodes, we'll spend some time examining world cinema in more detail.

Meanwhile, in the United States, that 1948 antitrust lawsuit we mentioned last time - United States versus Paramount Pictures, Inc. - forced the major studios to give up their theater chains. Suddenly, the marketplace was theoretically open to all kinds of films, not just whatever the biggest studios wanted to show in theaters.

The Hollywood studios were stubborn though, and didn't want to give up their money and control to the tidal wave of brash, young filmmakers that was sweeping the rise of the world. But as the 1950s rolled into the 1960s, the studios found themselves in real trouble. Boy howdy! After losing their theater chains, they began facing stiff competition from a little thing called television. As 1970 approached, the Baby Boom generation was coming of age, the war in Vietnam was in full swing, American politics was at its most violent since the Civil War, and studio films seemed increasingly out of touch.

Ticket sales were falling and studio executives were in an outright panic. Studio executives like money, you guys. So in the late 1960s, a set of films seized the opportunity to challenge the studio system from both inside and outside. Two New York based magazine writers - David Newman and Robert Benton - wrote a script called *Bonnie and Clyde* about a pair of charismatic depression era bank robbers on a crime spree.

Their goal was to create an American film in the style of the French New Wave, and in fact they almost got Truffaut to direct it. Arthur Penn directed the film instead, starring Warren Beaty and Faye Dunaway, and after winning over some influential critics, it became a sensation. With its unapologetic sexuality, casual humor, and surprisingly brutal violence, *Bonnie and Clyde* was a watershed moment in the history of American film.

It was made by Warner Brothers, but the film's success led to a cascade of independent films - films made outside the major studio system. In 1969, Dennis Hopper partnered with Peter Fonda to make a motorcycle road movie set to a contemporary rock-and-roll soundtrack. Produced on a shoestring budget, *Easy Rider* became a massive financial and cultural success. In many ways, these two films - along with movies like *The Graduate* in 1967 and *Midnight Cowboy* in 1969 - ushered in an era of surprisingly personal, idiosyncratic American filmmaking and proved that unique, original films could also make money. And so could Dustin Hoffmann.

At the same time, the older generation of studio executives began to retire. They probably were okay though. They probably retired on a beach somewhere very nice. In their place came a new crop of Hollywood decision makers who were shaped by the same societal forces as the younger filmmakers - like the rise of the counterculture, and Watergate-era politics. Suddenly, filmmakers with original visions who wanted to tell risky stories could get financed by major Hollywood studios. And that's the way it stayed until this day. NOPE!

Directors like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Brian de Palma, and Robert Altman were supported by big studios, and made films that reached an audience hungry for something new and fresh on screen. This window of creative control and experimentation came to be called New Hollywood Cinema and lasted from about 1967 to 1980.

===== End of New Hollywood Cinema and Beyond (7:56) =====

And it came to an end for a few major reasons. Many of these New Hollywood filmmakers began working with larger and larger budgets, which put more pressure on them to succeed at the box office. For every *Apocalypse Now* - a film that seemed like a disaster that turned out to be a success, there was a *Heaven's Gate* - a film that appeared to be a sure bet that flopped so hard it ruined a studio.

And at the same time, filmmakers like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas were creating movies like *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Heard of 'em? Instead of overtly wrestling with the socio-political upheaval of the '60s and '70s, these films offered a chance to escape, a more pure form of entertainment that appealed to a wider audience. These were the first summer blockbusters, and their unexpected success signaled a swing away from the more risky, personal films of the previous decade.

Plus, as all this was happening, the studios were being purchased by large, multinational corporations, which changed the way the studios worked. No multinational corporation ever purchases me.

Gone were the days when a cigar-chomping studio boss decided which films got made based on his gut instinct. Instead, there were stockholders to satisfy, marketing departments to consult, and risk assessments to consider. Very corporate. Oooo, I love me some risk assessment.

Film had always been a mix of art and commerce, but this period of blockbusters and corporate culture forever changed that balance. The major studios spent much of the 1980s making big movies that appealed to as many people as possible - films like *E. T.*, *Back to the Future*, *Die Hard*, and *Dirty Dancing*. And, once again, the more unusual American films had to find other funding.

The 1990s saw the arrival of a new set of independent filmmakers and mini-studios. Directors like Spike Lee, Steven Soderbergh, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Quentin Tarantino made films for independent companies like Miramax and New Line Cinema. It's not a coincidence that many of these filmmakers came of age admiring the films of the New Hollywood Cinema. And while they didn't have the resources of the major film studios, the success of films like *Do the Right Thing*, *Sex, Likes and Videotape*, and *Pulp Fiction* showed there was still a hunger for risky, original American films that continues to this today

===== Recap and Credits (9:40) =====

Today we talked about the rise of post-war film movements that reacted against the classical Hollywood filmmaking style. We saw the influence of Italian Neo-Realism and the French New Wave on the New Hollywood Cinema filmmakers of the 1970s. And we discussed the rise of the blockbuster of the 1980s and the resurgence of independent filmmaking in the 1990s. Next time, we'll look at home video and how streaming services like Netflix and Hulu are a major force in recent film history.

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