World Cinema - Part 2: Crash Course Film History #15

Crash Course: Film History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=qfu0lbsIGSs
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/qfu0lbsIGSs

Films can be a lot of things: A form of mass communication; a means of personal expression; or a business, big or small… depending on how many superheroes you cram into one movie. But films can also create, clarify, or reinforce a national identity. In many places outside of the United States and Europe, cinema arrived relatively late, and often at a time of political upheaval. Filmmakers used their movies to tell their own stories and establish new, collective identities. Although the industries of Africa, South America, and the Middle East relatively small, these films and filmmakers are vitally important both to local audiences and to the diversity of world cinema.

[Opening Music Plays]

African cinema is generally divided between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. The biggest film producer in North Africa is Egypt, and Egyptian cinema has dominated the Arab world for decades. Egyptian cinema's "golden age" ran from the 1940s to the 1960s. In this era, the studios produced Hollywood-style genre movies and prestige dramas. In 1952, the Egyptian monarchy was overthrown, and a new military regime was ushered in by a charismatic leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser's government nationalized the film industry in 1966 and began exercising significant control over what movies got made. Many filmmakers felt stifled, unable to produce films even vaguely critical of the current regime. But Egyptian filmmakers still found ways to produce classics at the time, from *Al Haram* by Henry Barakat to Shadi Abdel Salam's *The Night of Counting the Years*.

In the 1970s, Egyptian cinema began to find a balance between politics and entertainment. And during this time, their first internationally-recognized director emerged. Youssef Chahine was born in 1926. After college, he convinced his parents to send him to Hollywood to study acting. He then returned to Egypt and directed his first feature film at just 23, a movie called *Daddy Amin*... who said actors can't direct? His second film, *Nile Boy*, was invited to the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. And his third, *The Blazing Sun*, introduced the world to Omar Sharif, an actor who would go on to international stardom in English language films like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*. But Chahine's major achievement was an autobiographical trilogy, made between 1978 and 1990, which traced the social history of modern Egypt.

In the 1980s, as government censors relaxed a bit, several women directors graduated from the Egyptian Film Institute and began making movies with explicitly feminist themes. This marked a new and vital phase of Egyptian production, as Asmaa El-Bakry directed 1991's *Beggars and Proud Ones* and Inas Al-Degheidy released *Lady Killers* the following year. The Gulf War in 1991 and the emergence of satellite television brought the Egyptian film industry to a near-standstill. But by the mid-2000s, domestic production had rebounded and continues to thrive to this day.

Algeria is home to another significant North African film industry. After a vicious war and winning their independence from France in 1962, Algerian movies were mostly what they called "freedom-fighter cinema." These were films about the struggle to escape colonial rule. It wasn't until the 1970s, however, that an Algerian film broke out onto the world stage. Mohammed Lakdar-Hamima's *Chronicle of the Years of Fire* depicted one family's epic journey through the end of the colonial period. The film won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 1975. Beginning in 1992, a militant Islamic insurgency took root in Algeria, and the ensuing violence has forced most Algerian filmmakers to live and work abroad. Many contemporary films focus on characters that have left Algeria and struggle with their identities as expatriates. Rachid Bouchareb's 2010 film *Outside the Law*, for instance, deals with three Algerian brothers living in France between 1945 and 1962, during the Algerian war for independence.

Now, one notable film-producing country in sub-Saharan Africa is Senegal, another former French colony. And the undisputed father of Senegalese film is Ousmane Sembène. A veteran of World War II, Sembène moved to France in 1947 and experienced racism while working in a car factory and at the shipping port of Marseille. He turned these experiences into his first French-language novel, *The Black Docker,* in 1956. And he would return time and again to themes of isolation, persecution, and loss of identity in his films. After studying filmmaking in the Soviet Union, Sembène returned to Senegal to make a twenty-minute short called *Borom Sarret* in 1963, commonly considered the first indigenous black African film. Sembène's next film, *Black Girl,* stands as one of the first anti-colonial films to come out of Africa and gain international recognition. The story follows a young Senegalese woman working as a nanny for a French family in the capital city of Dakar. After accepting an offer to return to France with them, she finds herself disrespected and abused, surrounded by a culture that refuses to accept her. And at the end of the film, her story ends in tragedy. Sembène would go on to make films right up to his death in 2007, wrestling with complex issues of identity and culture in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

Other African countries have their own vibrant filmmaking traditions. Angola established a film school in 1977, two years after it won independence from Portugal. The country of Burkina Faso is home to the Pan-African Festival of Cinema and Television, the largest African film event in the world. And Nigeria has a vital film culture with its own star system, making it the third most valuable film industry in the world.

Now, another region that boasts a long history of post-colonial and indigenous cinema is Latin America. Although many Latin American film industries have been dominated by films from the United States, Cuba and Brazil have maintained some autonomy. Cuba produced about 150 feature films prior to the Cuban Revolution in 1959. But almost immediately after Fidel Castro took over, the film industry became an arm of his government. He founded a national film institute and commissioned films through the National Board of Culture. Like many leaders before him, Castro understood the power cinema had to influence masses of people, many of whom were poor and illiterate.

Most established filmmakers fled or were pushed out, so the revolutionary era of Cuban cinema began with a handful of people with little filmmaking experience and some old equipment. Over the next two decades, they would produce over 100 feature films, 900 documentary shorts, and 1,300 weekly newsreels. That's a lot of content! By the 1970s, Cuban cinema's infrastructure of domestic production and distribution were in place, and the films got more sophisticated. Genres and styles multiplied, encompassing everything from Sergio Giral's experimental Marxist work *The Other Francisco*, to Sara Gómez's *One Way or Another*, a fusion of Hollywood style and avant-garde social critique. But the 1990s hit Cuban cinema hard.

With the fall of communism in Europe, Castro's government had few allies besides China and North Korea. Movie production fell off a cliff, dropping from about 10 feature films per year to just two or three. And political repression got worse, so many filmmakers left the country to live in exile throughout Latin America. Eventually, a combination of factors led to a resurgence of film production in Cuba: like digital technology making production less expensive, coupled with relaxing tensions with the United States.

Now, the other major Latin American film industry hails from Brazil. In 1924, the majority of films screened in Brazil came from Hollywood, like the rest of Latin America. President Getùlio Vargas tried to end the dominance of Hollywood cinema by establishing quotas for local film production in 1932, which continued into the

1950s. But that didn't do much. The highly charged political atmosphere of the 1960s was the real catalyst for change. Inspired by the aesthetic of the Italian Neo-Realists and the low-budget filmmaking techniques of the French New Wave, a group of Brazilian filmmakers created cinema novo or new cinema. The cinema novo directors made films that deliberately subverted the norms of classical narrative cinema, in direct response to what they saw as the colonization of Brazilian cinema by Hollywood.

The group's unofficial leader, Glauber Rocha, made *Black God, White Devil* in 1964. It's about a poor ranch hand who's cheated out of his wages, kills his boss, and goes on the run with his wife and a violent, apocalyptic preacher. There's a fearlessness to the film, and a rejection of a traditional moral code. Nelson Pereira dos Santos made *Barren Lives* in 1963, another key film in the early cinema novo movement, and one invited to the Cannes Film Festival. His film tells the story of an impoverished family trying to survive in Brazil's drought-ridden northeastern plain.

This focus on low-budget productions that examine the socio-political landscape caught on in other Latin American countries. Indigenous filmmakers found inspiration to tell their stories without relying on traditional film studios or government assistance. And while their films might not screen much internationally, filmmakers from Argentina and Chile to Colombia and Peru have used this model to forge their own cinematic identities.

Now, one of the major players in Middle Eastern cinema is Iran, whose domestic market was also dominated by U.S. movies for years, until the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The first Iranian-produced film to break out internationally was Dariush Mehrjui's 1969 film *The Cow*, telling the story of a rural villager whose prized cow dies. Mehrjui's film was banned by the pre-revolutionary Iranian government. They wanted films that would project a modern image to the rest of the world, not ones that examined the day-to-day life of the downtrodden. Nevertheless, T*he Cow* went on to win top prizes at the Chicago and Venice Film Festivals and set the template for the Iranian New Wave.

Much like the French New Wave and Brazil's cinema novo, the Iranian New Wave produced films that explored the lives of ordinary people, especially those facing hardship and persecution. After the Revolution, the government of Ayatollah Khomeini exercised strict theocratic censorship over Iranian film, decimating production and prompting many established filmmakers to flee the country. The Iranian film industry finally began to recover in the 1990s, as filmmakers fell into two main camps: the "populist cinema" that made commercial entertainment; and the "art cinema" that produced more personal, esoteric films. One of the major figures of recent Iranian cinema is Abbas Kiarostami, whose film *A Taste of Cherry* won the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1997. Mohsen Makhmalbaf's 2001 film *Kandahar* made a Time magazine list of the top 100 movies of all time. And Asghar Farhadi has won two Best Foreign Language Oscars for his elliptical domestic mysteries: *A Separation* from 2011, and *The Salesman* from 2016. So although post-Revolution Iranian cinema took a while to achieve serious global recognition. It has since emerged as a narrative and stylistic innovator on the world cinema stage, influencing filmmakers and inspiring film goers around the globe.

Today we explored more world cinema, beginning with the post-colonial cinema of Africa. We talked about the development of Latin American cinema through the lens of Cuba and Brazil. And we touched on the vital filmmaking tradition of Iran established during the last 25 years. Next time, we'll jump into the strange and exciting world of experimental and documentary filmmaking. It's gonna get weird... and real!

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