

C. The World in our Backyard: Global Cinema and the Chicago International Film Festival

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Thursdays, 9:30 - 11:00 a.m. Norris University Center

Every October, the Chicago International Film Festival (CIFF) brings over 100 features and shorts to our city, hailing from dozens of nations, traversing all known genres of film and at times inventing new ones. First-time spectators find their way each fall to this jewel in Chicago's cultural crown, yet even devout patrons aren't always aware that CIFF is North America's oldest competitive film festival. Even better, given its record of adventurous programming and globe-trotting tastes, the festival's screenings since 1965 constitute an eclectic history in miniature of this expansive art form, from sober nonfiction to flamboyant surrealism, from mainstream legends to lesser-known innovators. This course, coinciding with CIFF's 60th anniversary, honors the thematic, geographic, and stylistic breadth of world cinema while paying rare tribute to a local institution of global renown.

*Note: Each week features a "Marquee Title" central to the lecture and a "Double Feature" option, treated more briefly in class but just as relevant to that week's themes. You will get the most from each session if you watch either or both of these movies in advance. Go to **justwatch.com** or click the links below to find where each movie is currently available to watch, but please bear in mind that titles constantly cycle in and out of every streaming service's listings. Should any film become inaccessible between now and the lecture in question, I will substitute a new title at least one week in advance. Many films are also available as DVDs, at local libraries or for sale online.*

Sep. 26 **Marquee Title: *Who's That Knocking at My Door***
 (Martin Scorsese, USA, 1967)
Double Feature: *The People vs. Paul Crump*
 (dir. William Friedkin, USA, 1962)

At its birth in the mid-1960s, Chicago's premier film festival embodied the tenor of those times, as the classical Hollywood studio system gave way to a restructured U.S. industry and as new artistic and political voices demanded to be heard all over the world. Amid that tumultuous era, and despite the festival's own fragile start, CIFF showed a keen eye for promising talents, offering vital showcases to under-the-radar rookies who, within a decade, would become household names. While fleshing out the story of CIFF's unlikely origins, we will note how debut features by *The French Connection's* William Friedkin and *Taxi Driver's* Martin Scorsese signaled major careers to follow—for them and for the festival itself.

Oct. 3 **NO CLASS**

Oct. 10 **Marquee Title: *Bushman***
 (dir. David Schickele, USA, 1971)
Double Feature: *Fruit of Paradise*
 (dir. Věra Chytilová, Czechoslovakia, 1970)

While boosting the careers of future Oscar champs and mainstream titans, CIFF's programming vigorously stretched the bounds of cinema beyond commercial genres or U.S. perspectives. From the outset, artistic director Michael Kutza avoided safe choices, regularly bringing risk-takers, outsiders, surrealists, and anti-authoritarian gadflies to Chicago's screens, dismantling any preconceptions of how movies must be shaped or styled. By platforming gutsy, inventive art wherever it arose, CIFF also modeled some ahead-of-the-curve commitments to racial, national, sexual, and gendered diversity, even when the movies in question did not speak the languages of civil rights, gay liberation, or feminist revolution most typical of that period.

Oct 17 **Marquee Title: *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul***
 (dir. Rainer W. Fassbinder, West Germany, 1974)
Double Feature: *The Spirit of the Beehive*
 (dir. Victor Erice, Spain, 1973)

As the festival entered its first full decade, cinematic "New Waves" continued to proliferate around the globe, often in tandem with youth-driven social movements, sometimes despite or in direct response to the squelching of progressive energies by censorious regimes. The New German Cinema and New Spanish Cinema were two such phenoms on which CIFF kept close tabs. Though both featured heterogeneous styles and voices, we will examine one landmark title from each that continues to surface on lists of the greatest movies ever made. We'll also note how bold political commentaries in *Ali* and *Beehive* interact with reflections on cinema's own history.

Oct. 24 **Marquee Title: *Close-Up***
 (dir. Abbas Kiarostami, Iran, 1990)
Double Feature: *About Elly*
 (dir. Asghar Farhadi, Iran, 2009)

Chicago has collectively played a leading role in exposing U.S. audiences to the longstanding, varied, and glorious tradition of Iranian cinema, from the attention-getting appraisals of local scholars to the stalwart backing of Second City film venues like Facets and the Siskel Film Center. CIFF has also been a huge part of that story for the past six decades, regularly booking the rarefied art films as well as the engrossing crowd-pleasers that Iranian auteurs have generated since the late 1960s—often amid antagonistic conditions at home and abroad. This lecture will survey a wide range of the genres and standout titles the festival has shown to Chicago audiences, often many years before other U.S. cities caught a glimpse.

Oct. 31 **Marquee Title: *The Gleaners and I***
 (dir. Agnès Varda, France, 2000)
Double Feature: *Brother's Keeper*
 (dir. Joe Berlinger & Bruce Sinofsky, USA, 1992)

It's easy to forget how recently documentaries moved from the outer fringes of U.S. public film culture to a dietary staple element of what so many critics, exhibitors, and audiences consume. CIFF has showcased an expansive spectrum of nonfiction cinema since its inception; it continues to show particular advocacy for films that captivate viewers but have not yet caught the eye of commercial distributors. That said, the festival's programming annals also feature a number of era-defining titles that raised the overall public profile of documentary storytelling on the silver screen from the late 1980s onward, from true-crime investigations to playful experiments.

Nov. 7 **Marquee Title: *Chungking Express***
 (dir. Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong, 1994)
Double Feature: *Flowers of Shanghai*
 (dir. Hou Hsiao-hsien, Taiwan, 1998)

Critics and scholars often assert that the most stunning cinematic development of the late 20th and early 21st centuries was the artistic bloom and global popularity of so many East Asian cinemas, especially from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea. Expect several clips and titles to percolate in lecture, since no two films come anywhere close to capturing this region-wide surge, so varied in cultures and styles. Still, the contemporary, high-velocity noir/romance *Chungking Express*, shown in Chicago years before it hit U.S. art houses, and the languidly opulent period piece *Flowers of Shanghai*, a festival sensation that never reached popular cinemas, signal how closely CIFF kept its finger on all these reinvigorated pulses.

Nov. 14 **NO CLASS**

Nov. 21 **Marquee Title: *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days***
 (dir. Cristian Mungiu, Romania, 2007)
Double Feature: *La Ciénaga*
 (dir. Lucrecia Martel, Argentina, 2001)

The post-Y2K decade also witnessed robust growth and greater diversity in the very different film cultures of Latin America and Eastern Europe. Particularly vital in those regional flowerings were the national cinemas of Argentina, where a new generation of aesthetic and political risk-takers emerged; and of Romania, where acting styles and narrative techniques honed on the stage gave rise to astonishingly nuanced and powerful dramas. Both countries participated in a worldwide trend of "slow cinema," refusing the hyperactive pace of internet-era storytelling, but if that sounds like a recipe for sluggish, socially disengaged art, prepare to be transfixed!

(Please note that the Cannes-winning *4 Months...* charts the obstacles to securing an abortion under a communist regime. Expect some difficult images and story turns.)

Nov. 28 **NO CLASS**

Dec. 5 **Marquee Title: *Holy Motors***
 (dir. Léos Carax, France, 2012)
Double Feature: *Happy as Lazzaro*
 (dir. Alice Rohrwacher, Italy, 2018)

CIFF's early openness to unusual story structures and experimental styles has not dwindled over six decades, as verified by this week's selections. Both won the festival's highest prize and went over big with audiences, too. In markedly different ways, the contemporary surrealisms of *Holy Motors* and *Happy as Lazzaro* confront perennial questions of the 21st century. When did identity come to feel so mutable, and what are its surviving limits, if any? How would people of earlier eras react to the ways we live now? How do we balance remembering vs. mythologizing our pasts? How do money and class ground or distort our senses of self, individually or collectively? Alongside these slippery, surprising Gold Hugo recipients, we will see clips of other recent CIFF titles that threw familiar rulebooks out the window.

Dec. 12 **Marquee Title: *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt***
 (dir. Raven Jackson, USA, 2023)
Double Feature: *Tótem*
 (dir. Lila Avilés, Mexico, 2023)

In closing, we will revisit two Competition standouts from CIFF 2023, the most recent vintage as this schedule goes to press. Both concoct new formal languages and structures to convey tales of family, memory, loneliness, community, grief, and survival. The levels of nuanced detail betray concrete ties to the writer-directors' lived experiences, even as each movie flirts with the edges of the folkloric, the spiritual, and the unknowable. By the time this final lecture arrives, though, the 60th Chicago International Film Festival will have concluded, so we can take stock of how this year's event reflected aspects of its past while looking boldly ahead.