

**THE EVOLUTION OF CINEMA: HOW INDEPENDENCE CHANGED UZBEK
CINEMA**

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Abstract: Independence in 1991 ushered in an era of dramatic change in Uzbek cinema. The stable but ideologically constrained system collapsed, and the national film industry found itself caught between two opposing forces: the acquisition of creative freedom and the destruction of the traditional economic model.

Keywords: Uzbek cinema, independence, creative freedom, economic model, post-Soviet transition, film industry, cultural transformation

A Fresh Wave and the Search for Freedom

Between 1991 and 2000, directors, freed from ideological constraints, were able to rethink the recent past, explore previously taboo topics, and address complex issues of national identity. Instead of ideologically rigorous plots, stories about real people, their problems, spiritual quests, and tragedies appeared on screen.

During this period, young, ambitious directors emerged who took a fresh look at national cinema. Among them, Zulfikar Musakov, Yusup Razykov, and Ali Khamraev stand out. They became the leading representatives of the "new wave," bringing fresh ideas and bold themes to cinema.

Zulfikar Musakov's 1991 fantasy comedy "Abdullajan, or Dedicated to Steven Spielberg" became a striking symbol of this transitional period. Full of irony and light humor, this film marked a farewell to old conventions and opened the door to a completely new, freer approach to cinema. The film received international acclaim, winning the Golden Griffin award for best Uzbek film and ranking seventh in the Japanese foreign film rankings. Musakov continued his creative journey, directing such landmark works as "The Little Doctor" (1998), which won the prize for the kindest fairy tale at the Artek International Film Festival, and "Mommy" (2000), which won the Jury Prize at the Kinoshock Film Festival. Another significant milestone of this period was Yusup Razykov's film "The Orator," released to the public in the late 1990s. This historical drama deeply explores the tragedy of an intellectual struggling to find his place in a new, rapidly changing world during the establishment of Soviet power in Uzbekistan. The film received high praise and numerous awards, including the Grand Prix at the Kinoshock festival and the Russian Guild of Film Critics Award. These victories were important evidence that Uzbek cinema, despite financial difficulties, continues to produce works that are sought after and recognized internationally.

Another notable film, symbolizing the experiment in Uzbek cinema, is Ali Khamrayev's musical "Bo Ba Bu" (2000).

However, along with these successes, the film industry faced serious losses. The centralized system of state funding, which had ensured Uzbekfilm's stability for decades, collapsed. This led to a sharp decline in film production. The crisis was exacerbated by the complete collapse of the centralized film distribution system. Films struggled to reach audiences, leading to a decline in interest in national cinema.

Commercial Distribution Revolution

By the early 2000s, a new phenomenon emerged in the Uzbek film industry, critically dubbed "khon-takhta"—"chopping board." This phenomenon was a direct consequence of the lack of state regulation and oversight, which allowed numerous private studios to produce films like "hot cakes," hastily. This approach led to the mass release of low-budget and often low-quality films, which, according to film scholar Gulnara Abikeeva, made the Uzbek film industry similar to "the Indian experience, where quantity of films prevails over quality." Classic Uzbek cinematographer Shukhrat Abbasov also expressed concern about the lack of "strong conflict, a clash of ideas" in new films. At the same time, it was precisely this period that marked the industry's adaptation to market mechanisms. The lack of government funding forced private companies to focus on self-sufficiency and create products that would quickly find an audience. This led to an explosive growth of commercial genre cinema. Box office hits such as the comedies "Superbride" and "Borrowed Groom" emerged. These films, aimed at a mass audience, helped create a new, predominantly youthful audience that actively attended cinemas.

Between 2000 and 2016, a new generation of directors came to the fore. Among them were Ayub Shakhobiddinov and Yolkin Tuychiyev, who successfully combined commercial and auteur filmmaking. On the one hand, they produced box office hits popular with young people, such as "Sevinch," "Telba," and "Poyma Sing." On the other hand, their films became models for the new Uzbek festival cinema scene. Ayub Shakhobiddinov's "Parizod" (Heaven Is My Abode) won the Grand Prix at the 21st Kinoshock International Film Festival. And Yolkin Tuychiyev's "Chashma" (Source) won the prize for best film in the "Prospects" category at the 28th Moscow International Film Festival.

Thus, independence, although it took away stable funding, led to the formation of a self-sufficient market that has proven its viability. This period demonstrated that Uzbek cinema could survive in a market economy, albeit at a high cost, and laid the foundation for further development, giving rise to many film studios and talent.

Modern Revival

By the late 2010s, a new era emerged in Uzbek cinema, marked not only by a qualitative leap but also by renewed government attention to the industry. Since 2017, after President Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power, cinema has been recognized as an important tool of cultural diplomacy and ideology. At the initiative of the head of state, large-scale measures were taken to systematically support and reform the film industry, allowing Uzbek directors to re-enter the global arena. According to the Cinematography Agency, 123 film projects were created in 2024, an increase of almost 300 percent over 2017.

The state not only increased funding for high-quality projects—for example, allocating over 105 billion soums for film production in 2024—but also began actively supporting young filmmakers who have returned to serious themes, visual aesthetics, and national narratives. Films have emerged that combine profound content with festival potential. Among them are Yolkin Tuychiyev's "Two Thousand Songs of Farida," which received international acclaim, and the young talent Shokir Kholikov's "Yakshanba," which became a true triumph. The film won dozens of awards and grand prix at prestigious film festivals.

During this period, special attention has been paid to the development of historical and patriotic genres. A large-scale project, "Living History," has been launched, creating films dedicated to important events and prominent figures in Uzbek history. One striking example was Jahongir Akhmedov's film, produced at the initiative and with the support of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, telling the story of Zulfiya Zakirova from the Zangiata district of the Tashkent region, who lost five sons in World War II.

Modern Uzbek cinema is actively pursuing international cooperation. Joint production agreements have been signed with major studios such as Kazakhfilm and Lenfilm, as well as several Turkish and Iranian companies. This collaboration is already bearing fruit. The film "Makhtumkuli" (2024), a joint effort with Turkmenistan, won the Audience Award at the prestigious ECG Film Festival in London. Yolkin Tuychiev's "The Great Emir and Donna Maria," produced in collaboration with Turkey, became the highest-budget film in the history of Uzbek cinema. The collaboration is not limited to joint film production but also aims to systematically develop the industry through education. An important step in this direction was the opening of a branch of the All-Russian State University of Cinematography (VGIK) named after S. A. Gerasimov in Tashkent. The establishment of the university is aimed at training qualified personnel—directors, camera operators, screenwriters, and other specialists—who will contribute to the further development of national cinema. The opening of the VGIK branch has created a platform for cultural exchange and the integration of Uzbek cinema into the global film scene.

On the threshold of a new era

Uzbek cinema is now on the threshold of a new, exciting era. After decades of trials and tribulations, the industry has finally found solid ground that could become a springboard for the flourishing of a new generation of filmmakers.

State support has become systemic and encompasses various areas. Pitching sessions (presentations of film projects to find investors) are held not only by the Cinematography Agency but also by various ministries and agencies. This allows for the annual funding of approximately 100 short films and over a thousand social and documentary videos, which immediately open the door to international festivals and markets.

Thanks to the signing of memoranda between creative universities and private studios, young independent filmmakers now have unprecedented creative opportunities. Having proven the viability of their project, they can receive free equipment from educational institutions, private film studios, and the Uzbekfilm film concern. Graduates from specialized universities easily find work in television and the private sector, where films are actively produced in partnership with foreign companies.

The new generation has at their disposal not only government support but also the powerful tools of the digital age, allowing them to reach global audiences without intermediaries. The future of Uzbek cinema depends on this generation—on their ambition, talent, and willingness to find the perfect balance between commercial success and the creation of authentic, artistically valuable works of cinema.

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