

# For What Hollywood Spends On Lipstick



The Short Fiction Film

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# For What Hollywood Spends On Lipstick: The Short Fiction Film

## Introduction

### Invisibility and Prevalence

The production and consumption of short films is such an overlooked sector of the cinema that it is virtually indiscernible in standard accounts of film history. This study attempts to redress the balance somewhat, by conferring the format with some visibility in both historical and theoretical terms. In order to achieve this, short films are posited in a triangular relationship with the popularly designated categories of commercial feature film production on the one hand, and avant-garde (if I may apologetically continue to use that term<sup>1</sup>) moving image culture on the other. It may seem like an odd proposition, to suggest that films produced in wildly varying cultural contexts, sharing no historical affiliation and possessing no common conventions other than length, might be usefully lumped together as a classification. But I believe there are good reasons for proceeding; reasons which largely spring from the special peculiarities associated with producing a non-standard cultural commodity for which there is little demand in either the critical or commercial marketplace. My belief is that constructing the short film as a category - as a distinct cultural practice possessing its own autonomy - will be both useful and illuminating. It seems peculiar to me that shorts have *once more* become the most prevalent form of cinema production (as they were in the early silent era) whilst simultaneously having become the most invisible form of cinema exhibition. How can it be that so little critical attention is paid to such a widespread cultural

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<sup>1</sup> No other term covers quite the same broad range of filmmaking.

practice ? And why, given the profound lack of interest, do short films continue to be made at all ? It was with these issues in mind, that the central question around which this study is organised, came to be formulated:

**With short films having become the most invisible form of worldwide cinema distribution and exhibition, what characteristics have contributed to the format becoming the most prevalent form of film production today ?**

It is perhaps understandable that the majority of cinema-goers endure the current shape of cinema production, distribution and exhibition, dominated as it is by the Hollywood style feature length presentation, as if it were a necessary condition of Western consumer culture. But delving behind the ubiquitous multiplex, digital Dolby surround sound screens, it becomes apparent that today's film industry is the direct outcome of historically and culturally specific sets of economic, political, sociological, technological and aesthetic forces which prevailed throughout the preceding century.<sup>2</sup> None of what occurred was preordained. Neither has it achieved an enduring stability. Even now, from a vantage point at the beginning of a new century, cinema's future is impossible to predict. The present-day ascendancy of digital technology for one thing, poses daunting questions about the immediate future, especially in the key area of exhibition. Indeed, the current situation of technological flux could well procure as profound effects as did the emergence of synchronous sound; the invention of the Technicolor dye transfer process;<sup>3</sup> the advent of television; even the origination of basic cinema apparatus in the first place. As chair of the UK Film Council, Alan Parker recently pointed out, "the international landscape of film production is in the middle of a colossal transformation."<sup>4</sup>

Organisers of the annual Brief Encounters Short Film Festival in Bristol, Eileen Elsey and Andrew Kelly remind us that "the cinema would not only

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<sup>2</sup> see Thomas Schatz, 1992, p 605.

<sup>3</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 228.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Parker, 2002, p 10.

be a poorer experience without shorts, it simply wouldn't exist."<sup>5</sup> Yet in most major historical accounts of the cinema, short films are conspicuous by their absence. It is easy to overlook the fact that the first ever films were short; from the early endeavours of the Lumières, through the experiments of innovators like Méliès and Porter, to the Hollywood comedy shorts of Sennett, Chaplin, Langdon and Keaton in the 1920s and 30s. These pioneering silent movies embodied the lifeblood and promise of what was an exciting new medium. As an industry, short filmmaking approached its azimuth during the 1900s, when literally thousands of films were produced (often simultaneously and side by side) in hundreds of commercial studios.<sup>6</sup> The consumption of these films, initially consisting of a single shot, formed the entirety of the cinema-going experience during the first fifteen years of film history. This was a time when short films *constituted* the mainstream. And when the first sound films from Movietone appeared in the 1920s, these too were shorts.<sup>7</sup>

Moving beyond the earliest phase of the cinema, the story of the short film is largely defined by absence, to the extent that we might justifiably question whether an ensuing history of the format can be discerned at all. No comprehensive historical survey of short filmmaking yet exists, making detailed information extremely difficult to unearth. Despite exerting a considerable (if mostly unacknowledged) influence on mainstream film and television culture throughout their respective histories, short films achieve little exposure, attract scant critical or academic attention, and are virtually invisible to the average cinema-goer. Outside of the initial fifteen year period of cinema history (when there were no lengthy films with which shorts might be compared), the format has on no occasion re-surfaced to widespread public view. The first difficulty then, for a category so devoid of historical credentials, is to attempt to arrive at a definition of what constitutes a short film. New Zealand filmmaker Stephen McGlashan exemplifies the lack of consensus:

I have never actually read a definition of "short film" . . . I suppose short film

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<sup>5</sup> Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 139.

<sup>6</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 28.

<sup>7</sup> see Rea & Irving, 1995, p 226.

defines itself as “other” to the accepted feature format . . . Apart from that, I imagine there are as many short film definitions as there are short films.<sup>8</sup>

Most calls for a widespread engagement with short films are predominantly founded on the format’s value as an artform.<sup>9</sup> Since I am assuming from the outset that all forms of cinema can loosely be termed art, I hope that this does not appear to be an immoderate or exclusive approach. Nowadays, it is predominantly through competitive screenings at international film festivals that shorts realise a collective sense of purpose.<sup>10</sup> It is almost exclusively at these gatherings, held for the express purpose of celebrating innovation in the medium, that the format attains a modicum of visibility. And it is to the festival circuit that the majority of short filmmakers aspire. Although television (including video and dvd) is the most likely form of distribution today, short films were originally made for exhibition on cinema screens; and the artistic impulse behind the making of shorts is decidedly cinematic rather than televisual.<sup>11</sup> The vast majority of theatrical shorts continue to be shot on celluloid because of the medium’s aesthetic adaptability, dynamic tonal range and high resolution.<sup>12</sup> Traditional film equipment however is expensive, cumbersome, complex and time consuming to manage. Theatrical shorts are consequently heavily pre-planned and painstakingly assembled because of the high costs and logistical difficulties associated with such an intricately crafted medium. In comparison, the relative cheapness and speed of video production techniques omit much of the cost and pains of long production periods.<sup>13</sup> But the expeditious nature of the electronic approach has created the side-effect of engendering an over-reliance on dialogue (at the expense of formal dexterity), to the extent that much non-celluloid based television production leaves itself open to the charge of being little more than “radio with pictures”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen McGlashan in Yeatman, 1998, www

<sup>9</sup> see for example Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002 & Richard Raskin, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> see Johannes Riis, 1998, www

<sup>11</sup> see Christina Milligan in Yeatman, 1998, www

<sup>12</sup> see Steven Bernstein, 1994, p 14.

<sup>13</sup> see Johannes Riis, 1998, www

<sup>14</sup> see Nancy Graham Holm, 2001, p 123.

An opening distinction for my proposed triangular relationship might read that while the feature film concentrates exclusively on unproblematically developing story, characters and plot, the avant-garde film often dispenses with these elements altogether, preferring abstraction and experimentation. Amalgamating elements of the two, the festival bound short typically engages with the central tenets of narrative in fresh, critically challenging ways with often startling results. One could go so far as to claim that overemphasis on straightforward cause-effect plot relations is in fact detrimental in the short form.<sup>15</sup> By the same token, a similar charge could be levelled at an over-reliance on abstract experimentation, novelty and ambiguity. While the avant-garde tradition operates, defines and confirms itself against the popular cinema, the accomplished short habitually borrows freely from both camps. In this respect, shorts could be said to occupy the middle ground of the cinema as art spectrum - the experimental mainstream *minus the mass audience*; or the narrative avant-garde *minus the critical attention*.

However the short film 'industry' could in no sense be understood as a coherent movement of any sort. It is arguably the category of the art cinema to which contemporary short films can most readily claim to be a division. Although even here many crucial differences must be stressed. The sheer scale of the average art cinema enterprise dwarfs that of the short film. Budgets are large, and films are long and elaborate. Short films are able to attract neither the distribution nor the critical consideration of their high profile counterparts. Yet, despite being popularly conceived of as an amateur, strictly learning process activity, short filmmaking has mutated in recent decades into a vibrant activity which possesses a distinct identity and aesthetics of its own. This evolving persona derives from both the endemic poverty of means associated with the form, and from the artistic sense of freedom which is a corollary of the format's historical non-viability as a commercial enterprise.

Film historians Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery have emphasised the condition whereby "no film has ever been created outside of an

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<sup>15</sup> see Johannes Riis, 1998, www

economic context".<sup>16</sup> However, shorts are unusual in that they are neither required nor expected to generate a profit. This is a situation which is the diametrical opposite of the conditions of production of the feature film. But the consequence of relative economic 'independence' is that shorts are neither marketed, promoted nor reviewed. When, for instance, have you ever seen a theatrical short being marketed in a blaze of publicity ? When was the last time you read a review for one ? When did you last see one at the cinema ? If you have seen one, were you aware that it was going to be shown ?

The short film is an anomaly of sorts. In the economic system of theatrical distribution, promotion and exhibition, it hasn't even a foothold: the system is built solely for features, and even the old custom of adding on a short is fading.<sup>17</sup>

Although shorts have always been around, they have become increasingly invisible to the general public who may barely be aware of their continuing existence, let alone importance. This seems paradoxical for an artefact which is less intrusive, less time consuming and more readily 'digestible' than its longer counterpart - especially in the context of today's 'short attention span', accelerated Western lifestyle. The situation has become so dire that in the space of a hundred years, short films have been relegated from a position as the sole form of commercially available cinema to the most marginalised. Even the recognised 'classics' and festival winners are virtually inaccessible to the majority of cinema-goers. Yet thousands of short films continue to be made every year despite prohibitive costs, logistical and technological complexities and a dearth of exhibition outlets.

While compiling a catalogue of 16mm prints for educational establishments, George Rehrauer estimated that the number of short films produced worldwide in 1975 was upwards of 100,000.<sup>18</sup> In the year 2000, around 3,000 feature

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<sup>16</sup> Allen & Gomery, 1985, p 132.

<sup>17</sup> William Kuhns, 1974, p 1.

<sup>18</sup> see George Rehrauer, 1975, p 1.

films were made.<sup>19</sup> (With about six billion inhabitants in the world, that works out to be roughly one film produced per twenty million people.) Despite the unavailability of up to date statistics, it is safe to say that many more shorts are currently made than feature films. Iranian filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf claims that the digital revolution has created a situation in which “the ease with which just about anyone can become a filmmaker, is increasing the annual per capita short film production in every society of the world.”<sup>20</sup> Even if we confine our comparison solely to those shorts which are originated on celluloid (as this study does), they would still far outweigh the number of feature films produced. Yet an almost complete absence of critical coverage means it is extremely difficult to identify noteworthy films amidst the sheer quantity of shorts produced, most of which, it has to be admitted, remain in deserved obscurity. The vast majority of student productions for instance, merit no further screening beyond friends and family; but other graduation films like Lynne Ramsay’s Small Deaths (1995), and Asif Kapadia’s The Sheep Thief (1997)<sup>21</sup> cry out for more widespread exposure.<sup>22</sup>

The 1970s and 80s in particular heralded a veritable explosion of short film production within the education system due to the availability of relatively low cost video equipment.<sup>23</sup> In education, it is often the process of planning and executing a production, rather than the end result alone, that is seen as valuable. The need to learn through experimentation, even if it results in failure, is stressed as an important aspect of the creative process. Such an approach, characterised as it is, by a certain level of optimistic naivety combined with a lack of grounding in orthodox norms, is bound by very definition to produce a high percentage of ‘failed’ attempts, when assessed according to professional criteria. But considered from the avant-

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<sup>19</sup> see Samira Makhmalbaf, 2000, p 8.

<sup>20</sup> Samira Makhmalbaf, 2000, p 7.

<sup>21</sup> My use of filmmakers’ names is intended for identification purposes only. Despite the short form being frequently portrayed as auteur, or personal cinema, I do not mean to imply my accordance with this view.

<sup>22</sup> A welcome addition to the Cannes Film Festival is Cinéfondation which screens approximately fifteen shorts every year. This section of the festival was introduced in 1998 to support the screening of films made by film students from around the world. (see Francoise Pyszora, 1998, p 9.)

<sup>23</sup> see Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 8.

garde perspective, technique operates otherwise in the hands of the inexperienced practitioner, whose approach has not yet become normative through the acquisition of standardised skills.<sup>24</sup> Experimental filmmaker, Jonas Mekas remarks that:

Even the mistakes, the out-of-focus shots, the unsure steps, the hesitant movements, the underexposed and overexposed bits are part of the vocabulary. The doors to the spontaneous are opening; the foul air of stale and respectable professionalism is oozing out.<sup>25</sup>

How then, has the professionally produced feature film as the very embodiment of cinema come to seem like such a naturally occurring phenomenon ?

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<sup>24</sup> see Johannes Riis, 1998, www

<sup>25</sup> Jonas Mekas in Rees, 1999, p 66.

## Chapter 1: Invisibility

### A Modern World

[There is] a 'new sensibility' . . . in culture and the arts which challenges the rationalist need for content, meaning and order. The new sensibility, by contrast, immerses itself in the pleasures of form and style, privileging an 'erotics' of art over a hermeneutics of meaning.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th Century, cultural activities such as music, literature and the fine arts increasingly became self-reflexive - that is, they incorporated an examination of their own nature. Photographic and cinema apparatus were able to conjure forth what Roland Barthes has termed "the effect of the real"<sup>27</sup> in more comprehensive a fashion than had previously been imagined. Since Velasquez' astonishing painting of 1656, 'Las Meninas', in which the ostensible subject is boldly elided, an intense aesthetic preoccupation with what Michel Foucault describes as "representation undertak[ing] to represent itself",<sup>28</sup> ultimately resulted in an "emancipation of the subject"<sup>29</sup> in modernist art. Rather than attempting to mimetically copy external actuality, artists increasingly came to focus more and more on the phenomenon whereby artworks themselves actually altered the very realities which they had previously striven to encompass. Thus understood, artistic activities are no longer regarded as secondary to an underlying unitary reality which they vainly strive to *reflect*; artistic activities are rather the primary mechanisms through which realities are *constructed*. Any notion of some *elementary* reality which can be objectively or empirically apprehended without mediation is a phenomenological impossibility. Immanent meaning is replaced by dialectical conflict. The elusive and transient nature of perception ensures there can never be a

<sup>26</sup> see Susan Sontag in Best & Kellner, 1991, p 10.

<sup>27</sup> see Anthony Easthope, 1993, p 1.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, 1970, p 16.

<sup>29</sup> see Theodore Adorno, 1970, p 225.

position of guaranteed unequivocal 'truth'.

By virtue of being the "only independent artform to have been invented since the Renaissance",<sup>30</sup> the cinema's extraordinary combination of technology and art was one of the major advancements through which the early twentieth century came to see itself as the modern age. While the birth of modern art and the era of silent cinema practically coincided, it remains something of a curiosity today, that mainstream cinema is epitomised by the very pre-modern conventions which early 20th century culture rejected.

### Persistence of Vision

The briefest of time frames can catch, carry and change everything.<sup>31</sup>

In any survey of the cinema, it is important to bear in mind that there is actually no such thing as moving pictures at all. All moving image entertainment systems exploit gaps in human physiological perception which allow the presentation of sequences of still images to appear as uninterrupted motion. Individual frames, when presented at high enough frequencies (at least 16, although more commonly between 24 and 30 frames per second), appear as moving pictures. This phenomenon of "critical fusion frequency"<sup>32</sup> is more frequently known as Persistence of Vision.<sup>33</sup> It is sometimes confused with a lesser known occurrence called the Phi Phenomenon,<sup>34</sup> which causes the human visual system to intuit apparent movement where there is none. This peculiar effect is familiar to most of us in fairground style displays of intermittently flashing lights, in which each individual light bulb appears to be moving. It is these phenomena which allow the cinema to be

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<sup>30</sup> A. L Rees, 1999, p 9.

<sup>31</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xvi.

<sup>32</sup> R L Gregory, 1990, p 111.

<sup>33</sup> see R L Gregory, 1990, p 111.

<sup>34</sup> see R L Gregory, 1990, p 112.

technically and economically conceivable at all; and on which basis, early experiments in moving image technology were conducted. However, when the first basic cine apparatus emerged, it would have been absurd to surmise that it was to become the most powerful, persuasive and popular art form to manifest itself in the course of Western and world history.<sup>35</sup>

Legend has it that in 1893, Fred Ott, an assistant at Thomas Edison's Film Studio (the only such studio in existence at the time), sneezed in front of Edison's running camera. The result was the world's first successful photographic motion picture recording, copyrighted on January 7th 1894 as Record of a Sneeze.<sup>36</sup> The film was only ever utilised commercially in kinoscope parlours which consisted of single user devices.<sup>37</sup> However, a fee paying audience were soon to witness moving pictures en masse for the very first time in December 1895.<sup>38</sup> This presentation in Paris by the Cinematograph Lumière included the world's first ever dramatised film recording - The Sprinkler Sprinkled. Although the first screening was attended by only 33 patrons (63 of the 100 available seats remained unsold<sup>39</sup>), word of the amazing new sensation quickly spread around the globe. It became apparent that audiences were especially keen to pay for access to the *shared* experience of stories. Throughout 1896 the Cinematograph Lumière premiered all over Europe, in the UK, the USA, South Africa, Russia, India, South and Central America, Australia, China and Egypt.<sup>40</sup> Staggeringly, the fundamentals of film technology have barely altered since the Lumière days. 35mm celluloid film with four perforation pitch remains the standard acquisition and exhibition format throughout the world.<sup>41</sup>

For filmmakers and intellectuals alike, the early silent cinema was primarily regarded as a novelty rather than as an artform. Indeed the Lumières'

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<sup>35</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p vi.

<sup>36</sup> see David Shipman, 1993, p 8.

<sup>37</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 18.

<sup>38</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 21.

<sup>39</sup> see David Shipman, 1993, p 12.

<sup>40</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 22.

<sup>41</sup> see L Bernard Happé, 1978, p 51.

expectation that the new invention would be a short lived fad, contributed directly to their decision to prioritise commercial considerations over all else. This crucial determination toward financial gain was to provide the blueprint for the subsequent century of development in the cinema. Both right and left wing factions of modernism were dismissive towards popular artforms like the cinema because of their unremittingly profit-oriented motivation, and 'lack of moral advancement'. In this respect, modernist theory clung to the 'progressive' outlook of Enlightenment high culture which on the one hand emphasised T. S. Eliot's continuity with an idyllic, non-industrial past,<sup>42</sup> and on the other hand stressed Theodore Adorno's desire for a break with traditional aesthetics, but only as regards the 'serious' arts.<sup>43</sup> Avant-garde historian, A. L. Rees perceives that:

While cubism sought a pictorial equivalent for the newly discovered instability of vision, the cinema was moving rapidly in the opposite direction. Far from abandoning narrative, it was encoding it.<sup>44</sup>

Because it was so purposely cultivated as mass entertainment, Hollywood in the age of European modernism remained determinedly representational, realist oriented and unproblematically narrational; in direct contrast to the literature, music and painting of the day.<sup>45</sup> This philosophical divide was a feature of a rapidly changing cultural landscape which saw Cezanne exhibiting in the same year as the Lumières' screening of 1895.<sup>46</sup> Curiously, the "cinematic"<sup>47</sup> nature of cubism which developed between 1908 - 12, took place at the very time a primitive film language of cross-cutting and close-ups was developing in the cinema. Indeed, many cubist painters, like Picasso, were reportedly avid enthusiasts of early American adventure movies.<sup>48</sup> The overarching impulse of the early filmmakers was to develop an effortlessly intelligible language for screen drama which simulated the powerful narrative flow

<sup>42</sup> see Andrew Milner, 1994, p 27.

<sup>43</sup> see Theodore Adorno, 1970, pp 225 - 261.

<sup>44</sup> A. L. Rees, 1999, p 40.

<sup>45</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 10.

<sup>46</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 19.

<sup>47</sup> Malcolm Le Grice, 2001, p 6.

<sup>48</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 19.

that the 19th century novel and the theatre had successfully popularised.<sup>49</sup> In direct contrast to cubism's overt *disclosure of the artistic device*,<sup>50</sup> the narrative cinema was developing a technique of invisible editing, with a view to creating a continuous imaginary flow that smoothed the ruptures in action, perspective and point of view brought about by the cut.

Edwin S. Porter is widely credited with having photographed the first story film, The Life of an American Fireman (1903) and with having 'invented' editing. Porter, having studied Méliès stop-frame techniques closely, made significant attempts to match time and space across transitions, including cutting to close-ups and separate locations. These faltering steps were the tentative beginnings of a narrative system of film language which is generally referred to as classical storytelling.<sup>51</sup> The driving force behind the evolution of a straightforward visual grammar was emphatically economic. And throughout the remainder of cinema history, the distribution fuelled appetite for effortlessly intelligible 'psychological realism', effectively confined experimentation in popular films to within rigid parameters, especially after the introduction of sound in the late 1920s.<sup>52</sup> Formal experimentation in moving images henceforth became the province of avant-garde filmmakers. However, it is only after the formulation of classical Hollywood norms have been established, that we can meaningfully speak of an avant-garde alternative.<sup>53</sup>

### An Absence of Leisurely Amateurism

In 1999, more than a hundred years after the Lumière's

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<sup>49</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 25.

<sup>50</sup> see Kristin Thompson, 1981, p 35.

<sup>51</sup> see Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985.

<sup>52</sup> see Kristin Thompson, 1995, p 90.

<sup>53</sup> see Kristin Thompson, 1995, p 68.

inaugural event, Hollywood producer Don Simpson famously declared:

We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. We have an obligation to make money.<sup>54</sup>

Conversely, as early as 1926, Virginia Woolf was arguing on the contrary that the too easily attained 'literary realism' of the popular cinema might be rejuvenated, were it to proceed along more modernist lines.<sup>55</sup> In 1931, the novelist and amateur cineaste Winifred Bryher too, was lobbying for rebellion against the puerile constraints of the popular cinema:

If the cinema is to survive . . . [filmmakers] will have to make scraps of film that every commercial producer would refuse and project them on kitchen walls . . .<sup>56</sup>

The cinema-as-art mantle has been taken up in subsequent eras (under a variety of banners: avant-garde, underground, independent, experimental, alternative, oppositional, expanded cinema, personal cinema<sup>57</sup>), in the avant-garde tradition by countless practitioners: Maya Deren in Meshes in the Afternoon (1943); Stan Brakhage in Dog Star Man (1964); Kenneth Anger in Scorpio Rising (1963); and Charles and Ray Eames' Powers of Ten (1978), to name but a handful. After the second world war; when Hollywood's influence began to wane as a result of the divorce decrees,<sup>58</sup> a new *narrative* avant-garde emerged in Europe and the USSR - that of the art cinema. It is from this hybrid category, that the contemporary incarnation of the short fiction film, as reflected in today's high profile international festivals, could most readily be said to have originated.

While it would be ill-advised to set up a simplistic dichotomy between feature films as formulaic and shorts as innovative, it is nevertheless

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<sup>54</sup> Paraphrased from Don Simpson in Levy, 1999, p 18.

<sup>55</sup> see Michael O'Pray, 1996, p 7.

<sup>56</sup> Winifred Bryher in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xiii.

<sup>57</sup> see A L Rees, 1999, p 2.

<sup>58</sup> see David Bordwell, 1999, p 717.

important to take into account the economic conditions of production which governed the emerging feature film in Hollywood - conditions which ensured that exploration into the creative possibilities of film language remained within predetermined limits.<sup>59</sup> On visiting Los Angeles in 1964 to collaborate on the screenplay and filming of his first book The Collector (1963), novelist John Fowles was unnerved to discover that the most alarming aspect of Hollywood was “the absence of leisurely amateurism, from which all great art finally springs”.<sup>60</sup>

The classical [Hollywood] style was standardised during the 1910s. Its systems and relations among systems have changed relatively little since, and even many of its devices, like shot / reverse shot, have changed very little.<sup>61</sup>

Although it would be churlish to contend that feature films are entirely devoid of experimentation, it is nevertheless crucial to recognise that innovation has rarely been high on their makers’ list of priorities. The mainstream feature film industries (comprising of Hollywood, Bollywood and Hong Kong<sup>62</sup>) account for the overwhelming majority of cinema activity throughout the world. These massive entertainment industries are first and foremost corporate operations, not philanthropic ones. In the hard nosed business of film distribution and sales, innovation of itself does not sell cinema tickets. UK filmmaker John Boorman recalls with dismay how the Hollywood Studios would:

. . . insist that every scene is shot in such a way that it is malleable to editing, because when the picture is put together it will be test-marketed. Audiences will tell the makers what bits they don’t like. These will be recut or cut out or reshot. The audience is asked to rate the film excellent, very good, good, fair or poor. To be successful, a film must achieve over 80% in the top two categories. If it falls short, recutting and reshooting will continue until it does. During this process, any remaining fragments of originality that have slipped

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<sup>59</sup> see Malcolm Le Grice, 2001, p 186.

<sup>60</sup> John Fowles, 2003, p 4.

<sup>61</sup> Kristin Thompson, 1995, p 69.

<sup>62</sup> Fallaux, Halasa & Press, 2003, p 2.

through the net will be ruthlessly expunged.<sup>63</sup>

Fiction films generally shape narrative contiguity around an edited framework of elided time, and preserve dramatic unity according to a broadly Renaissance conception of quattrocento perspective,<sup>64</sup> cause-effect storytelling and mimetic action.<sup>65</sup> David Bordwell has demonstrated at length how the classical cinema subordinates stylistic devices in favour of narrative logic.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, and seemingly as a consequence of theatrical non-viability, the most acclaimed of contemporary short films tend to be conspicuous by an idiosyncratic approach which foregrounds technique as a *function* of narrative disclosure. It is in this respect, that shorts have so much in common with European influenced art cinema, of which Richard Abel coined the phrase “the narrative avant-garde”.<sup>67</sup> The early nation state art cinema movements like German Expression and the Soviet school of Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Kuleshov pursued a cultural cinema which they hoped would rival the other arts in seriousness and depth.<sup>68</sup> In the silent era, these non-dialogue based, highly visual films were able to reach as international an audience as the American-bred commercial films, against which they represented significant competition.<sup>69</sup> Many utilised non-linguistic devices such as abstract symbolism and montage editing, which were capable of overcoming language barriers, generating worldwide critical currency, in the process.<sup>70</sup> Yet, despite the support of cultural funding organisations and national distribution agencies, the making of art cinema films remains an expensive and precarious business in today’s climate of intense competition stoked by U.S. corporate interests. Each film is a one-off creation, bereft of an umbilical studio support mechanism, and is required to compete in a global marketing arena geared up for stars, genres and sequels.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> John Boorman, 2003, p 18.

<sup>64</sup> see Anthony Easthope, 1993, p 1.

<sup>65</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 6.

<sup>66</sup> see David Bordwell, 1985, p 12.

<sup>67</sup> A. L. Rees, 1999, p 4.

<sup>68</sup> see Robert Sklar, 1993, p 322.

<sup>69</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 31.

<sup>70</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 31.

<sup>71</sup> see Janet Staiger, 1985, pp 110 -112.

## For What Hollywood Spends on Lipstick

Even though film production is intrinsically expensive, maintenance of the illusionistic codes [inherent in popular cinema] excessively multiplies production costs. High production costs restrict access to the means of production to state and commercial interests as well as maintaining a division between production and consumption in cinema.<sup>72</sup>

Still photography had unalterably changed the course of the visual arts since it had become commonly operable around the 1840s.<sup>73</sup> This was especially evident in the multiple viewpoints, visual fragmentation and “deliberate disharmonies”<sup>74</sup> of cubism. It was also evident in the non-visual arts - in Joyce’s literature for example, and in Schoenberg’s music. While photography was a precursor to cine photography (both were based on the same light sensitive silver halide process of image ‘fixing’<sup>75</sup>), it is instructive to note their differing social and political destinies. Both inventions were quickly appropriated by the amateur for the purpose of chronicling ‘actualities’. Indeed the bulk of the Lumières’ programme consisted of this type of film - Workers Leaving the Factory, The Arrival of a Train, A Baby Being Fed, Men Playing Cards, Delegates Arriving at the Congress of the French Photographic Society and so on.<sup>76</sup> While the relative expense of movie production undoubtedly contributed to the investiture of popular cinema as a passive rather than an active social event, it is nevertheless tempting to speculate that film becoming a theatrical pastime was by no means the sole, nor indeed the inevitable consequence of early motion picture production. The combined camera-printer-projector,<sup>77</sup> as utilised by the Lumières for example, suggests that the industrial mass production of cine equipment might perhaps have followed a similar trajectory to that of stills photography, had the commercial impetus been present.

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<sup>72</sup> Malcolm Le Grice, 2001, p 186.

<sup>73</sup> see Walter Benjamin, 1936, p 220.

<sup>74</sup> A. L. Rees, 1999, p 20.

<sup>75</sup> see Beaumont Newhall, 1964, p 92.

<sup>76</sup> see David Shipman, 1993, p 12.

<sup>77</sup> see David Curtis, 1971, p 7.

Interestingly, home movie making equipment did not become a reality until 1923,<sup>78</sup> after which the mass production of smaller gauge 16mm and 8mm equipment met the demand from a burgeoning news gathering industry fuelled by war.<sup>79</sup> The development of portable cameras had a significant and widely reported impact in the cinema. It ultimately enabled Italian Neorealist and French Nouvelle Vague filmmakers for instance, to abandon the studio in favour of actual locations, and had a similarly profound impact on artists who were interested in exploring the creative potential of the film medium. Maya Deren's influential Meshes of the Afternoon (1948), for example, in which "cinematic techniques are employed to give a malevolent vitality to inanimate objects",<sup>80</sup> was photographed in her own apartment using a war surplus clockwork 16mm Bolex camera.<sup>81</sup> By this time most major Western cities had laboratories and sources of filmstock, while the flexibility of the technology "put the means of production in the filmmakers hands."<sup>82</sup> 16mm projectors became commonplace in universities, cine clubs and artists' groups, and screenings were often accompanied by talks from the filmmaker in person. It was at one such gathering that Deren was to provocatively assert, in a feminist missive, that she made her films "for what Hollywood spends on lipstick."<sup>83</sup>

The silent cinema was valued by Deren for its oblique relation to reality underlined by its very silence.<sup>84</sup> The absence of synchronised sound, atmospheres and effects permitted a high degree of freedom from the shackles imposed by the pursuit of 'objective' auditory realism. A side-effect of the talking picture had been a profound loss of visual dynamism in favour of a consolidation of the fundamental grammatical conventions of the 180 degree line,<sup>85</sup> matched reverse shots and shamelessly expository dialogue, as parodied in the film within the film in Singing in the Rain (1952). Deren's aesthetic refusal of the ideology of realism was

<sup>78</sup> see Patricia Zimmerman, 1995, p 137.

<sup>79</sup> see L Bernard Happé, 1978, p 26.

<sup>80</sup> Maya Deren in Sitney, 1979, p 9.

<sup>81</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1996, p 538.

<sup>82</sup> A. L. Rees, 1999, p 57.

<sup>83</sup> Maya Deren in Rabinovitz, 1991, p 49.

<sup>84</sup> see P. Adams Sitney, 1979, p 9.

<sup>85</sup> see Michael Rabiger, 1997, p 38.

the antithesis to the philosophy of the sound film, which had become manacled by the logistical complexities associated with achieving synchronised dialogue. Avant-garde film artists were particularly attracted to wind-up clockwork cameras, because the spring wound mechanism was so noisy that synch-sound recording was rendered impossible. Deren for instance, favoured the Bolex H-16<sup>86</sup> camera which had been designed for non-synchronous applications like reconnaissance during the war. Amazingly, these same Bolex cameras are still around today, and are used extensively in film schools for the same reasons - to encourage students to become visually articulate in advancing film narrative, by precluding the possibility of synchronous (and hence expository) dialogue.

Nowadays the illusion of realism facilitated by synchronised sound has paradoxically led to a state of affairs in which few commercial films incorporate synch-sound at all.<sup>87</sup> Some feature films retain synch dialogue, but in most instances even this is replaced during post-production automatic dialogue replacement processes.<sup>88</sup> The creation of realism is brought about entirely through artifice; all the elements of a soundtrack are arranged and manipulated using multi-track mixing devices to approximate verisimilitude and heighten dramatic effect. The paradox of illusory auditory realism becomes especially evident in the viewing of rough-cut edits in progress. Sound designer Randy Thom's demonstration of the separate elements which constitute the multi-layered final soundtrack of Forrest Gump (1994),<sup>89</sup> is especially interesting in this respect. Thom compiled the tape for submission as an Oscar nominee in sound design, in the awards of 1995.

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<sup>86</sup> see Steven Bernstein, 1994, p 31.

<sup>87</sup> see Michel Chion, 1990, p 143.

<sup>88</sup> see Michel Chion, 1990, p 145.

<sup>89</sup> see especially Randy Thom, 1994, Sound Design of Forrest Gump, Unpublished Oscar Nomination.

## Oligopoly

It would be a pity to have but one control over all printing presses in a nation - or in the world. The same can be said for film production and distribution. Yet this is coming about in the world of the West.<sup>90</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, broadening the base of production through the supply of flexible equipment and facilities was contrary to the interests of the early cine patent holders. While the resources of the stills photography industry were devoted to developing cheap cameras for mass use,<sup>91</sup> the early cine patent holders preferred to concentrate on the potential of movie photography as a theatrical concern. Theatrical exhibition was an especially lucrative proposition as a commercial venture since it was infinitely repeatable. Because of its high number of theatres per capita, the United States in particular, provided an ideal location for the expansion of the new medium.<sup>92</sup> Exhibitors there became increasingly powerful. Through 'vertical integration'<sup>93</sup> of the three phases of the industry - production, distribution and exhibition - monumental returns on investments could be virtually guaranteed in what was a potentially world wide market. Having steered a course which prioritised corporate enterprise to the detriment of artistic considerations, the mushrooming film business nevertheless managed to appropriate the traditional link between artworks and individual talent. Their audacious argument - countering the impersonal technology of film production with the necessity of direct creative authorship - was primarily an attempt to establish copyright and ownership in aggressive legal battles.<sup>94</sup> Needless to say, the auteur debate set in motion rages unabated today.

In 1909, a US cartel entitled the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) was formed in an attempt to 'legally' enforce what they claimed to be their

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<sup>90</sup> Thomas Guback (1969), in reference to the MPEA, in Allen & Gomery, 1985, p 136.

<sup>91</sup> see David Curtis, 1971, p 7.

<sup>92</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 28.

<sup>93</sup> see Allen & Gomery, 1985, p 132.

<sup>94</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 25.

sole licence on all movie production, duplication and exhibition equipment.<sup>95</sup> The MPPC consisted of the largest (vertically integrated) motion picture companies of the day: Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, Essanay, Selig, Lubin, Méliès and Klein.<sup>96</sup> Within such an oligopoly,<sup>97</sup> the handful of members (usually numbering less than ten<sup>98</sup>) are able to jointly control the price of a particular commodity; in this case cinema tickets. During the depression, industrial oligopolies increasingly became more influential than government in setting the economic priorities of American society.<sup>99</sup> Domination of the entire film industry was orchestrated by MPPC members from a power base built on ownership and control of the most lucrative American cinema chains.

It is tempting to speculate that future technical innovations such as sound, colour and widescreen systems, which required disproportionate capital investment, might never have been contemplated by such a conservative establishment, had they not promised to further enhance control of the wider industry from a base in exhibition.<sup>100</sup> These impressive technological developments were a precursor to the ‘megapictures’ of the 1960s, when competition from television and other leisure industries caused cinema audience figures to plummet.<sup>101</sup> Increased budgets geared towards special effects epitomised mainstream cinema’s quest to become the ultimate form of entertainment - as spectacularly different from small screen television as could be imagined. Since the 1980s tie-ins with merchandising, television rights, video rental and sound track CDs formed an additional and increasingly vital source of revenue.<sup>102</sup> Against this background of frenzied commercial activity, the popular exhibition of the humble short film collapsed<sup>103</sup> - a situation from which it may never recover.

UK director John Boorman likens Hollywood’s economic

<sup>95</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 31.

<sup>96</sup> see David Curtis, 1971, p 7.

<sup>97</sup> see Allen & Gomery, 1985, p 141.

<sup>98</sup> see Allen & Gomery, 1985, p 141.

<sup>99</sup> see “Oligopoly” in Worldbook Multimedia Encyclopaedia, <http://www.worldbook.com>

<sup>100</sup> see David Curtis, 1971, p 7.

<sup>101</sup> see Jim Hillier, 1993, p 13.

<sup>102</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 683.

<sup>103</sup> see Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 1.

philosophy to the American military machine, which although capable of annihilating all adversaries, is in imminent danger of collapsing under its own weight and bankrupting the United States.<sup>104</sup> In the 1980s, national television advertising was so expensive that in order to recover costs, a typical 'blockbuster' had to be capable of opening everywhere simultaneously. The reason was that up to 30% of a blockbuster's box office receipts are taken in the first weekend of release.<sup>105</sup> This radical but costly strategy required 1,000 prints at the time; a figure which has subsequently quadrupled to 4,000 at a cost of around five million dollars per film.<sup>106</sup> With marketing costs upwards of thirty million dollars, and A-list stars demanding up to twenty million, Boorman estimates that a contemporary blockbuster can scarcely be made for under a hundred million dollars.

## Hegemony

Meanwhile back in the 1910s, shorts were continuing to thrive in the United States until pressure from continental imports led to the popularity of longer films. The first films had been very short indeed; consisting of a single shot of under a minute in length. Longer films had become possible with the advent of editing, and the formulation of an effortlessly intelligible screen grammar, *built around a 180 degree field of view*.<sup>107</sup> This classical language aimed to create a "spatial and temporal verisimilitude"<sup>108</sup> which was firmly grounded in the everyday world with which every spectator was familiar.<sup>109</sup> In 1912, the international success of a forty minute, four reel epic from France entitled Queen Elizabeth precipitated the

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<sup>104</sup> see John Boorman, 2003, p 18.

<sup>105</sup> see John Boorman, 2003, p 18.

<sup>106</sup> see John Boorman, 2003, p 18.

<sup>107</sup> The 180 degree rule is founded on the premise that screen direction will be (confusingly) reversed if one "crosses the line". The explanation of this occurrence lies in the inescapable fact that film attempts the two-dimensional reproduction of a three-dimensional world.

<sup>108</sup> Pam Cook, 1995, p 216.

<sup>109</sup> see Bordwell, 1985, pp 50-59.

first moves towards the feature film's establishment as an enduring fixture of the cinema.<sup>110</sup> With the exception of Vitagraph,<sup>111</sup> the MPPC favoured retaining programmes of shorts, over which they could exercise greater control.<sup>112</sup> But the establishment of the cinema as a regular leisure activity led to increased demand for longer films. Initially, in a bid to stem the trend, the MPPC allowed only single reel presentations. Longer films were released one reel at a time in the form of serials - a strategy which gave rise to the cliff-hanger ending.<sup>113</sup> Some canny exhibitors however, on managing to accumulate all four reels of a film began to show the entire 'feature' consecutively. By 1914 the US had produced more than four hundred four reel feature films<sup>114</sup> and the theatrical exhibition of short films entered a terminal decline.

By the mid-teens, the feature had established its dominance over the one-reelers, and production, distribution and exhibition practices standardised the product's design and marketing.<sup>115</sup>

Factory style production, involving the division and specialisation of labour became the norm;<sup>116</sup> individual stars and genres received saturation publicity;<sup>117</sup> and a restrictive release system known as Run Zone Clearance<sup>118</sup> ensured that the Hollywood feature film attained an unassailable position in worldwide film production, distribution and exhibition. A notable exception was the comedy short, which became the most widespread surviving form of short fiction, and was as popular in Europe as it was in America.<sup>119</sup> Indeed shorter films continued to survive for several decades as kind of B-pictures in the overall cinema experience.

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<sup>110</sup> see Robert Sklar, 1993, p 55.

<sup>111</sup> see Allen & Gomery, 1985, p 146.

<sup>112</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 39.

<sup>113</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 61.

<sup>114</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 41.

<sup>115</sup> Janet Staiger, 1985, p 142.

<sup>116</sup> see Janet Staiger, 1985, p 91.

<sup>117</sup> see Janet Staiger, 1985, p 103.

<sup>118</sup> see Allen & Gomery, 1985, p140.

<sup>119</sup> see Gerald Mast, 1981, p 92.

The movie-going experience [in the 1920s] included the architecture and furnishings of the building itself, an elaborate stage show, the newsreel, a program of shorts, *and* the feature film.<sup>120</sup>

Curiously, the time for a short film's acceptance was much longer than that of a feature film. In fact, it was not unusual to find shorts gaining widespread acceptance "five or more years after their initial release."<sup>121</sup>

Nevertheless, the "vertically" produced feature film, shaped by an oligopolistic configuration of giant corporations, intent on maximising box office returns, became the corner stone of Hollywood's success. And vertical integration was by no means unique to America. Pathé in France was one of the first vertically integrated companies, having swallowed up its competitors by embarking on a programme of *horizontal* integration.<sup>122</sup> It was the American oligopolists though, who were to become so successful that in 1938 they "collected 94 per cent of all revenues from movie distribution in the United States".<sup>123</sup> Even in the UK, Hollywood accounted for a staggering 95 per cent of cinema revenue in 1925.<sup>124</sup> On facing repeated state intervention from the US government, which viewed industrial oligopolies like the MPPC as harmful to the depressed economy; and as a further consequence of competition from home and abroad, the MPPC itself ultimately failed to monopolise the motion picture industry.<sup>125</sup> Yet so successful were its strategies, that the hegemonic status of the feature film as a format remains unchallenged today.

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<sup>120</sup> Allen & Gomery, 1985, p157.

<sup>121</sup> George Rehrauer, 1975, p1

<sup>122</sup> Bordwell & Thompson, 2003, p 33.

<sup>123</sup> Michael Connant in Allen & Gomery, 1985, p142.

<sup>124</sup> see Allen & Gomery, 1985, p149.

<sup>125</sup> see Allen & Gomery, 1985, p149.

## Normative Vision

Although the pursuit of innovation as a specific goal of short filmmaking today implies a continuous and coherent history, it is difficult to demarcate a point in time when the short began to metamorphose into a discrete entity - as distinct from the avant-garde as it was from the commercial industry. Perhaps Roman Polanski's Two Men and a Wardrobe (1958) is the closest one can come to establishing a historical hinge point from whence the contemporary tradition of innovation in short filmmaking, as reflected in today's festivals, came into being. Post-war short films shared many of the objectives of the art cinema, which aimed to recuperate the mainstream fiction film from its languor of "moralising kitsch and sentimentalism".<sup>126</sup> Whether by challenging, adapting or refusing the traditions of the dominant cinema however, the short film of the late 20th century, continued to represent a much more democratically *accessible* avenue for the expansion of filmic codes than did the elitist art cinema of Godard, Wenders, Kieslowski, et al. Accommodating such a vast diversity of approaches is simply inconceivable in the realm of the industrially manufactured feature film, whether it be arthouse or mainstream. Since the closure of the Hollywood comedy shorts department in the 1950s in particular,<sup>127</sup> the short film form has evinced a freedom of experimentation, paralleled only by its fall from economic grace as a commercially viable proposition. This tendency towards experimentation *within* the confines of a broadly psychological realist orientation, can best be traced back to its roots in the cinema experiments of the modernist avant-garde.

As the dominant and industrial cinema achieved higher production values and greater spectacle, the avant-garde [of the 1920s] affirmed its 'otherness' in cheap, personal and 'amateur' films which circulated outside the cinema chains.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> A. L. Rees, 1999, p 31.

<sup>127</sup> see Richard Raskin, 2002, p 1.

<sup>128</sup> A. L. Rees, 1999, p 2.

Modernism as we have seen, revolved around a radical appraisal of the untenability of a fixed point of view and the resultant instability of meaning, for both artist and spectator. In spite of the overwhelming impetus towards intelligible narrative coherence in mainstream cinema, modernist artist-filmmakers looked back to the early silent cinema, and to the comic burlesque in particular, for inspiration. There were a number of reasons why the comedy shorts retained an enduring appeal. For one thing, comic films tended to revel in the kinds of filmmaking devices which realist oriented popular dramas were at pains to suppress.<sup>129</sup> Avant-garde filmmakers were keen to embrace such distinctively filmic devices as a means of unchaining the filmmaking process from the shackles of narrative logic. Surrealist films from the 1920s such as those by Man Ray and Fernand Léger for example, like the film and video installation art popularised by the Turner Prize today, took their lead from the artistic and theoretical currents of the time. Echoing the comic burlesque, the surrealists seized on Freud's analyses of jokes as agents of the unconscious as potential source material for subversion in the cinema.<sup>130</sup> Luis Bunuel explained the Surrealist approach as follows:

The motivation of the images was, or [was] meant to be, purely irrational !  
They are as mysterious and inexplicable to the collaborators as to the spectator.  
NOTHING, in the films SYMBOLIZES ANYTHING.<sup>131</sup>

Possibly the most celebrated short film ever made, and still widely considered as one of the most influential, appeared in 1928. In its portrayal of "the very discontinuity, the horror, and the irrationality of the unconscious,"<sup>132</sup> Un Chien Andalou, conceived by the Surrealists Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel, was especially notable for signalling the growing importance of psychoanalysis in the visual arts. This audacious and shocking piece of cinema "cemented a lasting relationship between film and the fine arts",<sup>133</sup> spawning a tradition which prioritised

<sup>129</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 30.

<sup>130</sup> see Sigmund Freud, 1905.

<sup>131</sup> Luis Bunuel in Sitney, 1979, p 4

<sup>132</sup> P. Adams Sitney, 1979, p 11

<sup>133</sup> Cooper & Dancyger, 2000, p 2.

innovation over commercial considerations. Un Chien Andalou represented a deliberate assault on the preconceptions of its audience concerning the cinema's acceptability as an art form. This assault was literally inscribed in the film's most memorable and emblematic image: that of a razor slicing through an eye - the eye of the spectator's normative vision? However narrative causality / continuity remains to a large extent intact, although not explained. And the fact of only two characters sets up "a situation of identification"<sup>134</sup> which, as P. Adams Sitney observes, is relatively straightforward to follow:

Far from being puzzling, the film achieves the clarity of a dream. The extremity of the violence and the calculated abruptness of changes of time, place and mood intensify the viewing experience without satisfying the conventional narrative demands of cause and effect.<sup>135</sup>

Sitney further maintains that a radically experimental approach need not necessarily be at odds with narrative coherence:

"[T]he dream-like quality of their work derives from . . . the ferocity with which they dispelled the rational, while keeping the structural components of narrative."<sup>136</sup>

With its provocatively anti-rational, but nevertheless identifiably narrative structure, Un Chien Andalou is a clear precursor of the short fiction films on today's festival circuit.

Avant-garde filmmaking itself has rarely surfaced to public view, with the notable exceptions of this early Surrealist phase in the 1920s and the American Underground films of the 1960s.<sup>137</sup> As a succession of movements and counter-movements, the avant-gardes have been concerned to target themselves towards marginal audiences on the fringes of mainstream culture. Many exponents

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<sup>134</sup> P. Adams Sitney, 1979, p 4.

<sup>135</sup> P. Adams Sitney, 1979, p 4.

<sup>136</sup> P. Adams Sitney, 1979, p 13.

<sup>137</sup> A. L. Rees, 1999, p 1.

have literally “revelled in obscurity and obscurantism”.<sup>138</sup> Curiously, unlike contemporary avant-garde painting and sculpture, the film avant-garde never came to occupy the mainstream. Yet, its considered lack of desire as regards mass exposure, has by no means precluded the consequence of its having affected the widespread cultural picture:<sup>139</sup>

Almost inevitably, what were abrasive ideas earlier in the century get incorporated into mainstream moving image and cinema culture today.<sup>140</sup>

The commercial cinema has a knack of appropriating almost everything for its own uses. We only have to recall the example of Dada to recognise the phenomenon whereby art which initially sets out to oppose museum culture becomes “embalmed” within it.<sup>141</sup> Just how much the avant-gardes have directly and indirectly influenced the structure of say Stanley Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange (1971), the montage of Martin Scorsese’s Mean Streets (1973), the cutting of Oliver Stone’s JFK (1991) or the layered textures of David Lynch’s Lost Highway (1997); it is impossible to ascertain.

### Nationalism and Censorship

After the second world war, the then largest Hollywood corporations - Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Brothers, Paramount, RKO and Lowe’s - formed an aggressive cartel entitled the Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA).<sup>142</sup> Their success in overwhelming a crippled Europe, ravaged by war, with the purpose of “extract[ing] all possible profits, regardless of the consequences”,<sup>143</sup>

<sup>138</sup> Michael O’Pray, 1996, p 2.

<sup>139</sup> see Michael O’Pray, 1996, p 2.

<sup>140</sup> A. L. Rees in Taylor. 1999, p 20.

<sup>141</sup> A. L. Rees, 1999, p 3.

<sup>142</sup> see Allen & Gomery, 1985, p 136.

<sup>143</sup> Allen & Gomery, 1985, p 136.

was an act of corporate imperialism which received the full backing of the US government:

[T]he US film industry and US Defense Department cooperated to take over film exhibition in West Germany after World War 2 by claiming to employ Hollywood feature films to “reeducate” the German population.<sup>144</sup>

Even prior to this, European governments had reacted against the threat of cultural and political domination from America. Many followed the lead of the USSR, which had assumed control of all three phases of its film industry in the 1920s.<sup>145</sup> Although European countries did not organise their industries solely according to the profit motive, they nevertheless tended to replicate Hollywood’s vertical structure.

Initially, national cinemas had appeared to stimulate artistic achievement - Fritz Lang, F W Murnau and G W Pabst emerged in Germany; Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Lev Kuleshov in Russia.<sup>146</sup> Some filmmakers, like Eisenstein for example, “insisted”<sup>147</sup> on making films in the short format. But since the feature film had firmly established itself as the basic unit of marketing currency on a worldwide scale, alternatives were difficult to promote. European art cinema too, which seized the initiative after the war when the Hollywood major studios lost ground on being forced to sell their cinema chains,<sup>148</sup> tended to be dominated by the feature form. Although short films were being made, the feature’s overwhelming domination of theatrical exhibition remained intact.

Nationalisation became the pattern for all European film production and has significantly remained so . . . The advantages were the same as those sought by the Motion Picture Patents Company . . . with the further doubtful advantage of allowing direct government intervention to *protect* the public interest.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Allen & Gomery, 1985, p 136.

<sup>145</sup> Allen & Gomery, 1985, p133.

<sup>146</sup> David Curtis, 1971, p 8.

<sup>147</sup> see Sergei Eisenstein, 1984, p 9.

<sup>148</sup> see David Bordwell, 1999, p 717.

<sup>149</sup> David Curtis (my emphasis), 1971, p 8.

Censorship was a significant factor in deterring diversification in UK cinemas.<sup>150</sup> Even film clubs which had been organised as alternatives to the commercial cinema had to have their films passed by the censor.<sup>151</sup> (This is still technically true today: “Films . . . cannot be shown in public in Britain without permission from the local authority which governs the area where the film will be screened.”<sup>152</sup>) Such draconian measures originated in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917, when the British government was nervous about the prospect of civil unrest at a time of economic depression. The cinema had become an immensely popular medium, especially with the working classes, and stories which touched on any relation between capital and labour were banned outright.<sup>153</sup> There was little room for innovative manoeuvre in terms of either content or form. Although Eisenstein gave two lectures at the London Film Society in 1929,<sup>154</sup> and his theories of montage were widely discussed, their application was less than revolutionary. Elsewhere in Europe, Hans Richter was combining radical form with political content in short films like Everyday (1929); itself a product of one of Eisenstein’s London workshops, and in which Eisenstein himself featured as an actor.<sup>155</sup>

State censorship, combined with economic hardship in the wake of the first world war in Britain, eventually led to film being appropriated by radical groups such as The Workers Film and Photo League and the Kino London Production Group.<sup>156</sup> By virtue of necessity, these collectives, produced low budget shorts, like Bread (1934), which utilised a variety of forms. Found footage, archive, graphics and animation were mixed with live action to formulate a radical statement. Such experiments, influenced art students like Helen Biggar and Norman McLaren at

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<sup>150</sup> Censorship continues to be a significant element in the funding equation of a Hollywood blockbuster. Although spectacle and action are deemed vital to a film’s appeal, violence and sexuality are habitually suppressed with the aim of landing a PG rating. If this is not achieved, the film misses out on the family market and overall takings can be down by as much as 30% (see John Boorman, 2003, p 18).

<sup>151</sup> Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 7.

<sup>152</sup> Search & Wistreich, 2002, p 7.

<sup>153</sup> Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 7.

<sup>154</sup> Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 7.

<sup>155</sup> see Hans Richter, 1986, p 170.

<sup>156</sup> see Sarah Street, 1997, p 154.

the Glasgow School of Art to produced the stridently anti war Hell UnLtd in 1936.<sup>157</sup> These works were exemplified by a disaffection towards classical narrative technique, and were distinctive in their determination to transgress commercial genres with profound, often unexpected results. Several of the filmmakers involved were later to join John Grierson at the state financed GPO Film Unit,<sup>158</sup> which many regard as seminal to the tradition of British Social Realism that later flowered as the 'kitchen sink' dramas of the 1960s.<sup>159</sup> The political tangent of rebellion against a commercial cinema dictated by Hollywood, lead to the Free Cinema movement of the 50s, which in turn provided inspiration for the Workshop movement of the 70s.<sup>160</sup> Meanwhile, the founding of institutions like the London Filmmakers Co-operative<sup>161</sup> in 1966, represented the arts tangent. As in the current climate, large numbers of short films were being produced, but the mainstream feature film and television industries retained such a tight stranglehold over distribution and exhibition that screenings were low key. Independent distributors like Jane Balfour Films,<sup>162</sup> and later Cinenova<sup>163</sup> (the only distributor in Europe committed solely to promoting women's film<sup>164</sup>), faced an uphill struggle and survived on a shoestring. The cinema short was a rarity. Worse was to come when in 1984 the Thatcher government abolished the Eady Levy (a scheme which channelled a proportion of box office receipts into domestic film financing) and wiped out capital allowance tax concessions for production.<sup>165</sup> The entire British film industry was reduced to a virtual standstill and the theatrical exhibition of short films appeared to have reached an end.

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<sup>157</sup> see Sarah Street, 1997, p 155.

<sup>158</sup> see Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 7.

<sup>159</sup> see Sarah Street, 1997, p 81.

<sup>160</sup> see Margaret Dickinson, 1999, p 176.

<sup>161</sup> see Sarah Street, 1997, p 149.

<sup>162</sup> see Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 132.

<sup>163</sup> see <http://www.cinenova.org>

<sup>164</sup> see Mel Taylor, 1999, p 16.

<sup>165</sup> see Alan Parker, 2002, p 4.

## Chapter 2: Prevalence

### Challenging Established Codes

We *have* an obligation to make history. We *have* an obligation to make art. We *have* an obligation to make a statement. We have *no* obligation to make money.<sup>166</sup>

Diverse sets of individuals and movements have regularly intersected with the mainstream from oblique angles. In the initial half of cinema's first century the borders between art, experiment and industry were considerably more fluid than in our 21st century climate of media power and divisive commercialism.<sup>167</sup> Blurring the avant-garde - art cinema - short film divide, recognised movements throughout the post-war period of cinema history have consistently produced inventive shorts, albeit in the shadows of more publicly acclaimed feature films. From the French Nouvelle Vague, for example came works like Alain Resnais' Nuit et Brouillard (1955), Chris Marker's La Jetée (1962) and Francois Truffaut's Les Mistons (1957). Adroit handling of the short form has long been a traditional means of accessing recognition for up-and-coming filmmakers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the commercial incentive, many have treated the short form primarily as a springboard to the feature film. Orson Welles' The Hearts of Age (1934) was an early (and phenomenally successful) example of this strategy, as was Roman Polanski's Two Men and a Wardrobe (1958), Martin Scorsese's The Big Shave (1967), Jane Campion's Passionless Moments (1983), and Jim Jarmusch's Coffee and Cigarettes (1986). Yet shorts are not the exclusive domain of aspiring feature directors. Many established directors specifically choose to work in the short format precisely because of the lack of commercial impediments. Stephen Daldry's Eight (1998), David Cronenberg's Camera (2000) and (director and chair of the

<sup>166</sup> Paraphrased (with added emphasis) from Don Simpson in Levy, 1999, p 18.

<sup>167</sup> see A. L. Rees, 1999, p 1.

British Film Institute<sup>168</sup> ) Anthony Minghella's Play (2000) are recent examples which imply that the traffic in shorts production is not all as one way as one might at first imagine.

The legacy of celebrating innovation in the short form is widely upheld today on the film festival circuit, where even the most prestigious of festivals such as Cannes include a short film category. Despite the publicity, hype and predominance of mainstream judges, the films selected for prizes are regularly non-commercially oriented.<sup>169</sup> In 1962, Robert Enrico's An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge was a groundbreaking winner of the Palm D'or, and more recently Lynne Ramsay's triptych Small Deaths (1995), and Marcell Ivanyi's Wind (1996) duly provided fresh paragons of the non-classical approach. Although the nation state has remained the main production context from which award winning shorts have emerged, the relevance of these films is international in scope. National borders are effortlessly crossed, not least by a widespread lack of reliance on dialogue. Some classic shorts, like Wind (1996), and Kom (1995) have no dialogue at all, while others, like Small Deaths (1995), and Clutch (2002), incorporate dialect purely as an element within an overall design which importantly *prioritises the specificity of cinema form over literary considerations*.

As well as constituting a kind of breeding ground for the imagination of the cinema in the West, short films have proved instrumental in establishing independent cinema cultures in other parts of the world. Ousmane Sembene's Borom Sarret (1963), made in Senegal for example, was the first African film made by a black African.<sup>170</sup> Similarly, short filmmaking was integral to the Imperfect Cinema<sup>171</sup> proposed by Julio Garcia Espinosa after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, and also to Argentina's Third Cinema<sup>172</sup> movement of the 1960s. Even in the UK, the short film has been an important means of securing exposure for

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<sup>168</sup> see British Film Institute, [www](http://www.bfi.org.uk).

<sup>169</sup> see Francois Pyszora, 1998, p 8.

<sup>170</sup> Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, 1994, p 71.

<sup>171</sup> see Julio Garcia Espinosa, 2000, p 296.

<sup>172</sup> see Solanas & Getino, 2000, p 275.

traditionally under represented sections of British society. However, as Malcolm Le Grice maintains, the successes should be qualified against an obdurate background of advanced institutional conservatism:

The structure of the [established] film and television industry permits access to production only to those individuals already predisposed to maintain [its existing social and economic functions].<sup>173</sup>

In the 1980s, part of the newly formed Channel 4's remit was to stimulate diversity by supporting minority filmmaking.<sup>174</sup> As a result, many black, gay and feminist filmmakers took advantage of the opportunity to make low budget shorts, with guaranteed airtime on national television. Isaac Julien's Who Killed Colin Roach ? (1983) and Sally Potter's The London Story (1982) are examples of political projects which "bridged narrative and abstract forms",<sup>175</sup> ultimately enabling their makers to reach a wider audience in features production.<sup>176</sup> Rather than seeking formal purity for its own sake, this strand of political filmmaking is concerned to devise specific filmic idioms capable of articulating dissident ideas, untainted by the restrictive language of the establishment they seek to challenge. It is a tradition which can be traced back to left wing documentaries in the UK in the 1930s,<sup>177</sup> through the civil rights era in the USA, to contemporary examples like Yousaf Ali Khan's BAFTA nominated drama Skin Deep (2001). Whether these films take their lead from politics, aesthetics, or both, they represent a conscious challenge to the established codes of dramatic realism which determine audience expectation and meaning in the commercial feature film.

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<sup>173</sup> Malcolm Le Grice, 2001, p 186.

<sup>174</sup> see Margaret Dickinson, 1999 p 74.

<sup>175</sup> Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 8.

<sup>176</sup> Diary of a Young Soul Rebel (1991), Orlando (1992).

<sup>177</sup> see Michael O'Pray, 1996, p 7.

## Economic Innovation

Matt Boysons, founder of the Short Film Bureau claims that “the nature of the short film industry as it stands, is one of achievement through co-operation”,<sup>178</sup> rather than the promise of financial return. Much interconnectivity currently exists between short fiction films and other short formats; be they advertising commercials, pop promos, television station idents, cinema trailers, avant-garde works or even artists installations. Short documentaries and animations have traditionally fared better than drama in UK cinemas, where at an early stage, drama was regarded as more suitable for feature length ventures.<sup>179</sup> Animation and advertising commercials continue to exert a powerful influence on the concise nature of storytelling in the short fiction film; with some formats, like the pop promo and the television commercial, actually providing scope for experimentation *within* the industrial context. Nevertheless, despite the abundance of goodwill and co-operation, as Allen and Gomery maintain:

. . . all so-called “alternative” practices, be they labelled amateur, independent, documentary, or avant-garde, have their economic component . . . a sizeable amount of money has to come from somewhere.<sup>180</sup>

The collaborative nature of filmmaking involves an extended network of relationships, outwith those directly involved in the production of a film. The expanded nexus comprises politicians, funders, festival organisers, marketing executives, distributors and so on. Since 1939 various forms of state subsidy, initially geared towards propaganda, have ensured the continuing existence of the cinema short in the UK.<sup>181</sup> In the 1970s Bill Douglas’ My Childhood (1972), Terence Davies’ Children (1976) and Peter Greenaway’s Dear Phone (1976) benefited from the “imaginative public funding”<sup>182</sup> of their time. Most contemporary short films

<sup>178</sup> Matt Boysons, 1998, p 11.

<sup>179</sup> see Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 3.

<sup>180</sup> Allen & Gomery, 1985, pp 132 & 133.

<sup>181</sup> see Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 6.

<sup>182</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xii.

however, are either unfunded, self-funded or made with the assistance of small grants from Regional Arts Boards and Media Development Agencies such as Film London, Scottish Screen, and the Film Council (which also has the responsibility of distributing lottery funding). Currently, there is a bewildering array of short film training, development and funding schemes on offer,<sup>183</sup> all of which have divergent priorities and increasingly daunting conditions attached. It is no mean feat to secure funding for even the smallest of projects and many filmmakers find themselves floundering in the attendant beurocracy. On top of the vast array of practical and creative skills required in making a film, innovation in the economic sphere is an additional and disconcerting prerequisite for getting a film project off the ground in the first place. First time filmmaker Irvine Allen, spent literally years cobbling together the finances necessary to fund his 2000 Cannes Palm d'Or winner Daddy's Girl as follows:

It was shot for £45,000. BBC Bristol 10 x 10 gave me £18,000, Scottish Screen provided £20,000, the BFI £2,000, and the Glasgow Film Office another £5,000; all acquired in that order.<sup>184</sup>

Television companies, which represent the most accessible means of exposure, tend to regard one off shorts as very expensive airtime, although some indulge in elaborate collaborative ventures in which one agency will put up script development money, another will put up production finance, while yet another will contribute to postproduction.

For experimental filmmaker Stephen Dwoskin, "a finished film is a projected film: that is its function".<sup>185</sup> But only a fortunate few short films ever make it to answer print<sup>186</sup> stage. Fewer still achieve any kind of meaningful distribution outside of late night television broadcasts as filler material. Distribution and exhibition remain largely outside of the equation and very few films, including

<sup>183</sup> see Andrea Cornwell, 2003, 109 -121.

<sup>184</sup> Irvine Allen in Search & Wistreich, 2003, p 152.

<sup>185</sup> Stephen Dwoskin, 1975, p 52.

<sup>186</sup> see Steven Bernstein, 1994, p 149.

the critically acclaimed, ever reach a mass audience.<sup>187</sup> Yet in spite of the insurmountable obstacles, the UK short film 'industry' has undergone something of a revival in recent decades. The legacy of earlier anti-establishment movements has transmogrified into a plethora of independent film resources on the internet, most of which are run on a non-profit making basis. Organisations like the Short Film Bureau<sup>188</sup> and the Rocliffe Film Forum<sup>189</sup> have succeeded in promoting the screening of shorts in mainstream cinemas; and film festivals devoted exclusively to the screening of shorts have proliferated. The Brief Encounters festival in Bristol is the UK's most prestigious; whilst many others exist internationally, for example at Tampere, Clermont-Ferrand and Oberhausen. Outside the festival circuit, arthouse cinemas like the Curzon Soho in London are increasingly running programmes of shorts.<sup>190</sup> Most of us however, are far more likely to chance upon short films on late night television runs of The Shooting Gallery (which transmits 16 hours of short films annually<sup>191</sup>), BBC 10 x 10, Short and Curlies or Tartan Shorts than at the cinema. In September, 2003, Filmfour screened over 200 short films, mostly in themed programmes, broadcast in the early hours of the morning.<sup>192</sup> Filmmakers like Lynne Ramsay accept that despite winning the Jury Prize at Cannes for Gasman (1997) - her second Cannes award - her highly acclaimed films reach an infinitely wider non-theatrical audience on television.<sup>193</sup> Bizarrely, the earlier Cannes winner, An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge (1962), reached its widest audience as an episode of The Twilight Zone. Mainstream filmmakers too are increasingly forced to accept the harsh reality that their films can now aspire to reach a mass audience only in a non-theatrical context.

Since the crisis of the 1980s, the UK appears to have developed two parallel yet decidedly separate film industries.<sup>194</sup> The official industry mimics the

<sup>187</sup> see Peter Broderick, 2000, p 63.

<sup>188</sup> see Short Film Bureau, www.

<sup>189</sup> see Rocliffe Film Forum, www.

<sup>190</sup> see Serious About Shorts, www.

<sup>191</sup> see Paul Gallagher, 1999, p 11.

<sup>192</sup> see Channel 4 Listings, www.

<sup>193</sup> see Fraser MacDonald, 2002, p 119.

<sup>194</sup> see Nic Wistreich, 2003, p ix.

Hollywood model; spending years on script development, attaching stars, production teams and highly paid experienced crews. More often than not, funding will at least partly be sourced from Hollywood and will be tied to a marketing and distribution deal, yet most films will never recover the amount of money spent on making them. Depressingly, the present cost of producing a British feature film is far greater than its market value.<sup>195</sup> Currently, the average UK feature film costs £3.5 million to make but is likely to gross only £350,000 at the domestic box office.<sup>196</sup> In other words it will recover only one tenth of its initial outlay from theatrical distribution. Increasingly, the value of a cinema release is as a marketing tool rather than a money spinner. Profit margins from television, video and dvd sales are potentially so much greater than box office receipts that the primary function of a theatrical release is the press, publicity and word of mouth activity which surrounds it. It is this activity which boosts the more lucrative 'secondary sales'.<sup>197</sup> Little surprise then, in this prohibitive economic context, that the 'unofficial' film industry inhabits "the arthouse ghetto of low budgets and deferred fees".<sup>198</sup> Films are shot on "credit-card sized budgets"<sup>199</sup> by filmmakers whose passionate commitment to their art far exceeds any desire to accumulate business savvy. Fly by night production companies run on a shoestring, making films which rarely find any form of distribution at all, and are unlikely ever to recover basic costs.

In his keynote speech, given in November, 2002, chair of the UK Film Council, Alan Parker recommended that we should "stop talking about the British film *industry* and start considering our film *industries*"<sup>200</sup> because of their varying objectives. While the recognised industry clearly needs to make cheaper films whilst taking more risks with subject matter and form, a hallmark of the unofficial industry is a serious absence of the know how required to finance, target, package and sell films to distributors and broadcasters successfully. Rather than

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<sup>195</sup> Felicity Carus, 2003, p 3.

<sup>196</sup> see Nic Wistreich, 2003, p ix.

<sup>197</sup> see Search & Wistreich, 2002, p 4.

<sup>198</sup> John Boorman, 2003, p 18.

<sup>199</sup> Nic Wistreich, 2003, p ix.

<sup>200</sup> Alan Parker (my emphases), 2002, p 8.

pitting themselves against each other, both industries would do well to learn from each other. With the production of traditionally financed and distributed UK films having dropped sharply since 2001, despite a huge increase in cinema admissions,<sup>201</sup> established producers cannot continue indefinitely making films which cost more than their market value. And although the unofficial sector is actually expanding, independent producers will find it impossible to get their films screened at all if they blithely ignore the demands of sales and distribution completely.

### Does Size Really Matter ?

Amazingly, in light of their considerable (if mostly unacknowledged) influence on mainstream film and television culture, the short films of today - like their predecessors - continue to receive scant critical or academic attention. Shorts have at no time surfaced to public view outside the initial fifteen year period of cinema history, when lengthier films had not yet become a reality. The present state of affairs is all the more puzzling when one considers that university media departments and film schools number amongst the most prolific producers of short films; many of which deliberately set out to explore alternatives to accepted storytelling conventions. Perhaps the disinclination of critics and academics in pointing to the value of shorts stems from a reluctance to construe a classification of films purely in terms of running time. Certainly, at first glance, length would appear to be an arbitrary and ridiculous basis for a 'genre'. Does size actually matter ? Surely short films incorporate the same genres that long (and medium sized) films do ? After all, they do not necessarily 'work' in significantly different ways. Or do they ?

The fragmentary nature of shorts production does not sit

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<sup>201</sup> see Nic Wistreich, 2003, p ix.

comfortably with accepted notions of genre, the commercial function of which was to combine production line efficiency with the manufacture of a homogenised product; cutting costs in the process, while simultaneously stabilising marketing and sales.<sup>202</sup> Film programmer and festival juror Gareth Evans, considers duration to be an extremely significant factor:

[I]n this arena all elements are amplified, not reduced.<sup>203</sup>

Evans maintains that it is the very “principle of magnification”<sup>204</sup> inherent in a work of limited duration which identifies the best short films as “crystalline creations of precise, prismatic intensity”.<sup>205</sup> The short is an opportunity to communicate ideas *concisely*. There is no space for extra information. Every element is included for a reason. Even classically structured three act shorts with no pretensions to radical experimentation like Charlie Call’s *Peep Show* (1999), Oliver Krimpas’ *Hard Labour* (2002), and Robert Sarkies’ *Signing Off* (2002), visibly profit from the rigorous economy demanded by brevity; a discipline for which “omission becomes a pivotal principle”.<sup>206</sup> According to Evans, the most accomplished shorts are those which consciously utilise the constraints of the format; constraints, which when tackled pragmatically, translate into creative opportunities rather than constricting limitations.

The freedom of the short film relative to the long film lies in the [greater] possibilities of using metaphor and other literary devices to tell the story, a luxury [less commonly] available in the commercially driven, realism-oriented long film.<sup>207</sup>

In spite of (and very possibly because of) the limitations, shorts are adept at disclosing particularities of the zeitgeist that features and other commercial products

<sup>202</sup> see Thomas Schatz, 1992, p 604.

<sup>203</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xi.

<sup>204</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xi.

<sup>205</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xi.

<sup>206</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xiv.

<sup>207</sup> Cooper & Dancyger, 2000, p 5.

pass over. This emphasis on the particular over the general was actually inscribed in the programme notes of the 45th Oberhausen International Short Film Festival:

Like Hollywood films, [the city of Oberhausen's planners] had designed a risk free, over-exposed cul de sac of normality. Besieged by the impending 'Disneyfication' of their local landscape, the programme curators [of the 45th Oberhausen International Short Film Festival] . . . were interested in analysing the ever more complex, decentralised and thus less vulnerable power structures which Bigness tends to camouflage.<sup>208</sup>

One of the foremost attractions of the short film format is the requirement for simplicity (not superficiality); a welcoming of a filmmakers' concentration and elaboration of what is often a single idea. Evans contends that the most affecting of shorts, despite at first glance appearing "deceptively fragile and insubstantial,"<sup>209</sup> reveal "an irresistible poignancy, which stems from an acceptance of their inability to 'contain' their world".<sup>210</sup> Many possess a poetic force, at odds with the prevailing economic and political climate of features production, for which commercial clout is paramount. This propensity towards metaphor has prompted many commentators to eulogise shorts as the poetry of the cinema in contrast to the prose of their longer counterparts.<sup>211</sup> Chris Graham's *Water* (2002), is a prime example of allegorical narration, in which an innocuous burst pipe as witnessed by an unheeded child, leads to a submerged house and acts as an eloquent metaphor for procrastination, denial and global warming.

Is it really so absurd then, to acknowledge the very shortness of short films as a decisive factor in claims that they should be regarded as a distinct artform? At the very least, it would be a mistake to dismiss shorts as feature films which happen to finish earlier; epics squashed into ten minutes, with the sole purpose of eliciting their makers' aptitude for producing longer films. Aside from running time and a lack of commercial orientation, the main crucial distinguishing

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<sup>208</sup> Michal Sapir, 1999, p 6.

<sup>209</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xi.

<sup>210</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xi.

<sup>211</sup> see Richard Raskin, 2002, p 3 & Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xiv.

feature of shorts is their comparative accessibility as a cinema format (although as we have seen, the making of shorts remains a costly business). Since the UK does not presently have a sustainable feature film industry, most filmmakers are forced to seek alternative outlets for creative material. And since films cannot under normal circumstances be made by individuals, smaller scale projects are important in providing opportunities to forge collaborative partnerships, assemble production teams and sharpen filmmaking skills. The short film represents an important option in which the prohibitive expense, orthodox division of labour,<sup>212</sup> and stylistic conventions of the feature film industry need not necessarily apply.

Short films, with their limited production time and lower budgets, provide an essential space for experiment and innovation where [filmmakers] can try different structures, different ways of working with actors, different subject matter, without feeling that failure [commercial or otherwise] will bring an end to their careers.<sup>213</sup>

Just as the avant-garde overtly rejects and critiques mainstream cinema entertainment, together with the audience responses it anticipates, the short film seeks alternative 'ways of seeing'.<sup>214</sup> Short filmmaking operates almost entirely outside of the conventions of the dominant cinema, which are dictated by its industrial mode of production.<sup>215</sup> The relative economic and creative freedoms which the short enjoys however, are constrained by the format's peculiarly *non*-industrial mode of production. Street level financing and exhibition are the norm, meaning there are no financial or executive controls: films needn't adhere to commercially manufactured genre conventions; stars are rarely involved; the size of principal cast is likely to be small; a single (unspectacular) location is not unusual; equipment and facilities are minimal; shooting schedules are tight. Formal innovation is necessarily part of the equation as imagination is harnessed to enforced industrial pragmatism.

The attendant poverty of means engenders a spirit of experimentation, emancipated

<sup>212</sup> see Janet Staiger, 1985, p 91.

<sup>213</sup> Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p 4.

<sup>214</sup> see John Berger et al, 1972.

<sup>215</sup> see Janet Staiger, 1985, p 89.

from the pressures normally associated with feature film and television production. Filmmakers instead concentrate on becoming adept at building up dense layers of meaning, purely by using combinations of sounds and images creatively across a limited time span in which form *functions narratively*.

### Ways of Seeing

In contrast to the operations of the commercial film, and in common with the aspirations of the abstract film, the most challenging of short films arrange their stylistic devices to present sets of relationships which resist closure; thereby inviting the participation of the spectator in the production of meaning. In Lynne Ramsay's Small Deaths (1995) for example, expectations are continually thwarted by a play on the ambiguities inherent in linguistic oppositions. What initially appears as straightforward distinctions between concepts - say between nature (as good, personified by the snail) and culture (as bad, symbolised by the brutishness of patriarchy) - is experienced as a much more complex interaction of ambiguities. Emotional clashes and fractured communications yield an uneasy coherence in which silences speak loudest and gaps are significant. Singular verifiable messages are avoided as dramatic incident remains open-ended. This is a Lacanian world of language which predates the film's protagonist Ann Marie; a world in whose linguistic contradictions she attempts to locate a series of contingent identities.<sup>216</sup>

Ann Marie finds it impossible to integrate her feelings of attraction and revulsion for the same men: her childish unquestioning love of her father clashes with his insensitive and controlling behaviour; her awakening attraction to some boys in a field is crushed by their brutality towards a herd of cows; she faces a sadistic test of character at the hands of her teenage boyfriend who permits his family to play a sick joke at her expense. Apparently straightforward distinctions

<sup>216</sup> see Jacques Lacan, 1949, pp 1-7.

become entangled: love and cruelty; life and death; good and evil; human and animal; male and female; happiness and pain; truth and illusion. The struggle to accommodate linguistic and conceptual ambiguity entails confusion, violence and suffering as reflected in a fragmentary formal design. Awkward camera angles, unbalanced compositions, unsteady framing, jump cuts, muffled dialogue and grainy textures inhabit an unorthodox narrative structure which deliberately eschews a conventional beginning and ending, and consists in its entirety of 'middle'.

The idea that formal innovation is as integral to the operation of the cinema as is narrative coherence, resonates strongly with the Russian Formalist notion of *defamiliarisation*;<sup>217</sup> and even more so with the Neoformalist concept of *the baring of the artistic device*.<sup>218</sup> David Bordwell's *Constructivist* approach to analysing narrative films, holds that it is the operations of the viewer that are central to the understanding of a film's style.<sup>219</sup> However, before proceeding along the path of the viewer as privileged locus of unproblematic meaning, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider some of the objections to the notion of the autonomous sovereign 'subject' which have been posed by poststructuralist theorists. For thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, 'man' is no longer the privileged object or centre of knowledge in the universe. The very conception of man is rather a 'construct' which is constituted from the changing structures of 'knowledge' in any given historical period. The discourses of every culture define the self within the rules of its structures, which are largely absorbed intuitively and unconsciously; thereby limiting the spaces and possibilities for utterances and actions.<sup>220</sup>

Our ideas about reality are not direct, natural knowledge of the world but are culturally determined in various ways.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Kristin Thompson, 1988, p 10.

<sup>218</sup> Kristin Thompson, 1981, pp 35 -37.

<sup>219</sup> David Bordwell, 1985, pp 30 -33.

<sup>220</sup> see Jonathan Culler, 1975, p 22.

<sup>221</sup> Kristin Thompson, 1988, p17

As human beings, we experience life anthropomorphically, according to the exigencies of our physiological bodies. What we *know* is governed only by what we have become accustomed to 'knowing'. Michel Foucault has indicated the processes through which individual personalities become socially and politically shaped by the prevailing discourses of geographical and temporal locations.<sup>222</sup> Jacques Lacan has established that the everyday world we inhabit is a textual one; that human beings exist almost entirely in and through language.<sup>223</sup> For Jacques Derrida, the truths we believe in are textual truths; they refer to other texts and not to a 'safely external reality'.<sup>224</sup> Each personality originates in a Lacanian *mirror stage*<sup>225</sup> in which the infant recognises itself as a distinct entity; from whence it *imagines* an identity for itself based on how it is communicated with by other individuals.<sup>226</sup> But while our identities are centred on the ability of each individual to communicate with others via language; in important senses, language actually *produces* us and constitutes our realities.<sup>227</sup> Even our unconscious is structured like a language according to Lacan,<sup>228</sup> who points out that language predates us; that we are born into it and have no option but to search for an identity inside it.

The relationship between words and things has long been a problematic one. In the BBC television programme 'Ways of Seeing' (1972), John Berger argued that:

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. [ . . . ] Words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by [the world]. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.<sup>229</sup>

At the turn of the 20th century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure proposed

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<sup>222</sup> See Michel Foucault, 1974, pp 21 - 30.

<sup>223</sup> see Jacques Lacan, 1953, p 86.

<sup>224</sup> see Jacques Derrida, 1966, pp 176 - 178.

<sup>225</sup> Jacques Lacan, 1949, pp 1 - 7.

<sup>226</sup> see Jacques Lacan, 1949, pp 1 -7.

<sup>227</sup> see Jacques Derrida, 1966, p 190.

<sup>228</sup> see Françoise Meltzer, 1990, p 158.

<sup>229</sup> John Berger, 1972, p 7.

that fundamental linguistic meaning resided *within* the structure of language as a system of differences rather than as a labelling system.<sup>230</sup> In effect, this meant that there could never be any fixity in the relationship between a signifier and a signified. The relationship is forever condemned to be arbitrary and depends solely upon consensus in order to function.<sup>231</sup> Yet because language is fluid, without origin,<sup>232</sup> and lacks certitude, human individuals construct their identities with no fixed point of reference. The linguistic signified is constantly sliding and slipping around beneath the signifier's attempted fixity. The human persona consists of knots of contradictory dramas in constant flux. No coherent, unified or fixed 'essence' can be located, only a dialectical interplay of conflicting discourses.<sup>233</sup>

It is with such reservations in mind then, that I proceed with a provisional understanding of what constitutes a 'spectator'.

### Equipment for Living

A viewer, says Bordwell, approaches a film already primed with a vast but finite number of expectations about the meaning of the film's style, based on organised bundles of knowledge accumulated from previous experience. Bordwell refers to these clusters of knowledge as *schemata*.<sup>234</sup> Schematic knowledge might be gleaned from everyday living, from other films or from artworks in general. According to Bordwell, the spectator "frames hypotheses and draws inferences"<sup>235</sup> about story information based on previously digested schemata. He asserts that films "presents cues, patterns and gaps that shape the viewer's application of schemata and the testing of hypotheses",<sup>236</sup> and that viewing a film is a highly

<sup>230</sup> see Ferdinand de Saussure, 1915, p 13.

<sup>231</sup> see Ferdinand de Saussure, 1915, p 15.

<sup>232</sup> see Jacques Derrida, 1966, p 177.

<sup>233</sup> see Catherine Belsey, 1980, p 14.

<sup>234</sup> David Bordwell, 1985, p 34

<sup>235</sup> David Bordwell, 1985, p32

<sup>236</sup> David Bordwell, 1985, p33

complex process, in which narrative comprehension is dependent on previously absorbed texts and conventions. The viewer's activities are *heuristic* in that the infinite possibilities of signification cannot be fully explored. Conclusions must be grounded in prior knowledge. Spectatorial activity is further anticipatory: a viewer typically predicts what is going to happen next by cross referencing new data with extrapolations, assumptions and expectations gleaned from broadly equivalent situations. Far from being passive observers, "people perform operations on a story".<sup>237</sup> The viewer in fact *constructs the story according to his or her schematic literacy*:

The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order.<sup>238</sup>

Digesting story patterns is one of the primary mechanisms we employ in engaging with our worlds and ourselves. Traditionally, narratives with their clearly defined beginning, ending and rationally coherent structure have represented the manifestation of a human desire for completion, wholeness and closure.<sup>239</sup> According to Danish film theorist, Torben Grodal, "narrative structure specifies some basic relations between perceptions, emotions and acts, and connects to fundamental ways in which we experience the world."<sup>240</sup> But what exactly do we understand by the term 'story' ? According to literary philosopher Kenneth Burke: "Stories are equipment for living."<sup>241</sup> They envelop us from birth and help confer a sense of intelligibility on the world.<sup>242</sup> At the earliest of ages, fairy tales acquaint us with the archetypal struggles between the oppositions of good and evil.<sup>243</sup> In fact, the most powerful way in which humans construct meaning, especially in the early stages of acquiring language, is through a system of binary oppositions: hot - cold; wet - dry; up - down; and so on. We understand the one because it is not the other

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<sup>237</sup> David Bordwell, 1985, p34

<sup>238</sup> Eudora Welty in Cameron, 1993, p11

<sup>239</sup> See Keep & McLaughlin, 'The Book', 1995, www.

<sup>240</sup> Torben Grodal, 1997, p 10.

<sup>241</sup> Kenneth Burke in McKee, 1997, p 2.

<sup>242</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 1998, p 89.

<sup>243</sup> see Bruno Bettelheim , 1976, pp 123 - 135.

and establish a dialectical picture of the world: a *duality* which is *removed* by the mere fact of linguistic transposition.

The nursery rhymes in Small Deaths are among the first texts of childhood which equip us for life as social beings: fantasies of rhymes, melody and story which help us to gain a foothold in language. They focus our perceptions and direct our play. They elicit our earliest dialogues and shape our personalities. We believe in the narratives of rhymes when we are small just as we believe in the permanence of our family, our home and our small world. Childhood rhymes give substance to the fantasies which sustain us in early life but which expire on the road to becoming a socialised adult. In adult life, we develop stronger mythical structures, mistaking them as the very material of our identities. Over time, our major dilemmas in life manifest themselves in dramatic conflict. Even our dreams take the form of symbolic narratives. All in all, it would appear that vicariously living the emotional turmoil of an imaginary character in a symbolic drama, is of more practical value for human beings than is abstract logical reasoning into to the ontological nature of being. We apprehend the world through rhythm; by rhyme rather than reason.<sup>244</sup>

### Offscreen Space

Marcell Iványi's short film Wind (1996) extends the operations of the viewer to extremes. Wind could be read as an exercise in decentred meaning, in which offscreen space represents the unknowable world of empirical experience. The formal organisation of diegetic elements; more specifically the withholding of clues and cues, implies dehistoricised, universally relevant relationships bereft of traceable origin.<sup>245</sup> The film's knowing refusal of conventional cinematic suture and simulation

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<sup>244</sup> see Julia Cameron, 1993, p 22.

<sup>245</sup> see Jacques Derrida, 1966, p 177.

of a totalising field of view suggests a broader (and implicitly elevated) understanding of life than is available to the protagonists;<sup>246</sup> *Wind* paradoxically facilitates the spectator in glimpsing a fuller understanding of events by compromising their ability to assign specific meaning. In such ways, the spectator is encouraged to stand apart from the shocking occurrence depicted, and explore the world of cinematic otherness which the film embodies, and which is as surely its subject as is the question of ethics.<sup>247</sup>

In narrational terms, events are straightforward to follow: three women stand in front of a cottage in a bleak rural landscape; they watch a man being hanged alongside several other gallows executions; finally the women turn expressionlessly towards the cottage and enter it. On one level, this description is an accurate representation of the action depicted in the film. Yet we are given no opportunity to learn who the women are; who is being hanged; by whom; for what offence; in what country; and in what historical context. All of this information is withheld. Are these women complicit in the execution; resigned to it; or opposed to it? Are the victims simply criminals; members of a political resistance; objects of ethnic prejudice; or maybe former officials being executed for previous and similar crimes against their own people? The answers to these questions exist only in offscreen space. The film itself does not seem to 'care' about the politics behind socially sanctioned violence. A sense of moral vacuity is underpinned by the 'indifferent' movement of the camera - which treats all elements as equal and emphasises none; by the understated, seemingly unconnected soundtrack and even by the outwardly incidental title: *Wind*.<sup>248</sup>

The film opens with a shot of the women looking offscreen to the left. Our expectation is that there will then be an eyeline match cut, or at least a pan, to reveal the subject of the women's gaze. Unexpectedly the camera tracks to the right, counter to the women's source of attention. The bulk of the film's screen time is spent in executing a *360 degree movement* which consists almost entirely of the

<sup>246</sup> see Thomas B Byers, 1998, [www](#).

<sup>247</sup> see Annti Ponna, 2002, pp 95.

<sup>248</sup> see Edvin Kau, 1998, [www](#)

empty landscape in preference, albeit in relation to, the characters. Towards the end of the track, the camera encounters the spectacle of the hanging on screen right - in a decidedly contrary manner to how *conventional 180 degree cinema language* would have us discover the object of the womens' interest; that is to say, from screen left. The effect of this strategy is to separate the look of the spectator from the look of the women, thus blocking identification and empathy with both the characters and the world narrated on screen.<sup>249</sup> The film grammar is deceptively simplistic and has many resonances with the earliest silent cinema, in that the entire film consists of a solitary, non-synch, black and white shot. 'Close ups' of the hanging for example are choreographed not through cutting, but by setting dramatic action close to the camera in the manner of the first enacted drama ever photographed - the Lumières' The Sprinkler Sprinkled (1895).

The non-standard formal organisation of Wind nevertheless constructs an identifiably syntagmatic narrative chain with a beginning, a middle and an end in the conventional order. Paradigmatic combinations however, are more elusive. The executioners, victims and spectators for example are dressed alike, rendering them seemingly interchangeable. Traditional narrative structures tend to be founded on binary oppositions or dyads which are in fact ideas solely contained in language itself. However, the conspicuous lack of reference points, circular structure and paucity of binary oppositions in Wind makes it impossible to discern right from wrong, lawful from criminal or good from evil, to such an extent that the cold specifics of a scene of extreme social violence, highlights the abstract nature of morality in general. Although saturated with meaning, the narrative *execution* defies coherent interpretation and the significance of events remains unknowable. The depth of the film is a paradoxical function of its simplicity, in that it requires the participation of the spectator in constructing a range of inexact meanings which are of themselves necessarily open to transformation. A denial of conventional storytelling technique permits spaces for such *movement* to occur, despite (and because of) the brief six minute duration. Curiously, the emotional effect of such

<sup>249</sup> see Thomas B Byers, 1998, www

profoundly pertinent open-endedness lasts long after the film has finished, when nothing short of “a new interpretation of one’s relation to the environment is called for”.<sup>250</sup>

### The Trauma of the Cut

Feature films in the form of the Classical Hollywood Cinema are the background on which the majority of cinema audiences (in the West) contrast the operations of all other films.<sup>251</sup> The Hollywood model comprises a complex system of formal techniques which developed along ostensibly ‘realistic’ lines; the goal being to formulate a filmic analogue of human physiological responses to the everyday world. The classical device of employing carefully matched reverse shots, which respect the 180 degree rule, aims to locate and preserve the spectator’s stability across the trauma of the cut; thereby producing an imaginary flow of narrative continuity.

Film conventions are modelled on the dialectical flow of our consciousness whenever we are following something of importance to us. Our emotional responses play a huge part in this by literally directing our sight and hearing.<sup>252</sup>

Norms of editing, camera movement and sound are learned and become almost automatically recognised *prior* to the requirement for conscious participation. The Russian Formalists in the 1920s believed that an artwork which utilised predominantly conventional techniques, ran the risk of engendering an automatic and unremarkable encounter for spectators. In Victor Shklovsky’s terms: “the radical coalesces into a new orthodoxy . . . [and] we no longer *sense* [the artwork]”.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Johannes Riis, 1998, www

<sup>251</sup> Kristin Thompson, 1981, p 14 - 18.

<sup>252</sup> Michael Rabiger, 1997, p 47.

<sup>253</sup> Victor Shklovsky in Thompson, 1980, p xi, (my emphasis).

The erosion of primary perception occurs because the task of processing overly familiar data becomes cumulatively tedious and uninteresting. Shklovsky continues:

Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, ones [partner], and the fear of war . . . Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed . . . <sup>254</sup>

While the underlying 'message' of most films can usually be grasped fairly effortlessly on a basic denotational level, films need not contain radically new ideas in order to be original. Indeed, most of the evident meanings, even in the most original of films, are likely to be existing ones. Texts in fact utilise systems of meaning in the course of their activity,<sup>255</sup> and meaning functions variously, depending on context.<sup>256</sup> On the spectator's part, constructing narrative coherence, involves a leap of the imagination rather than blind faith in the authority of consensually validated meaning systems.<sup>257</sup> According to Torben Grodal, far from having no function in life other than the production of fanciful illusion out of meaningless play, the cultivation of imagination is an indispensable tool in the construction of representational mental paradigms which facilitate a sophisticated level of interaction with the world:<sup>258</sup>

Imagination, consisting of hypothetical simulations of possible relations and processes, is a central aspect of everyday life; the difference between art and every day life is not one of kind but of degree.<sup>259</sup>

Classical tropes such as the 180° rule<sup>260</sup>, three-point lighting,<sup>261</sup> continuity editing<sup>262</sup> and diegetic synch sound,<sup>263</sup> are designed to broadly confirm a

<sup>254</sup> Victor Shklovsky in Thompson, 1988, p10

<sup>255</sup> see Kristin Thompson, 1988, p12

<sup>256</sup> Kristin Thompson, 1988, p15

<sup>257</sup> see Roland Barthes, 1977, pp 145 - 148.

<sup>258</sup> Torben Grodal, 1997, p 6.

<sup>259</sup> Torben Grodal, 1997, p 11.

<sup>260</sup> see Michael Rabiger, 1997, p 38.

<sup>261</sup> see Gerald Millerson, 1991, pp 73 - 75.

<sup>262</sup> see Walter Murch, 2001, p 5 - 9.

<sup>263</sup> see Michel Chion, 1990, p 109.

spectator's expectations in the telling of a story; expectations which are grounded in the three dimensional, audio visual world with which she or he is familiar.<sup>264</sup>

Accordingly, classical films tend to manipulate space and time in a coherently systematic manner, which once internalised, is effortless (if unremarkable) to follow. If, on the other hand, as the Russian Formalists proposed, an artwork were to present an event (even an overly familiar one) in an intriguing and unfamiliar light, it could precipitate a revitalising effect on the perceptual faculties of the spectator.

### A Critical Emotional Experience

What most people recall of an accident [or other striking experience] . . . is highly visual, abbreviated, selective, and emotionally loaded. Just like a film.<sup>265</sup>

In Rabiger's above example of an accident, heightened emotional activity usurps habitual functioning and seizes control of perception and cognition. An emergency state of mind is adopted in which attention becomes highly selective. Peripheral data which is not immediately relevant to the state of alert is ignored. The emotions literally dictate what is attended to. In Nelson Goodman's terms, "the emotions function cognitively".<sup>266</sup> Torben Grodal agrees:

The cognitive skills of humans have not been developed in opposition to their emotions and their bodies; on the contrary, they have been developed to carry out the preferences of the body-mind totality.<sup>267</sup>

For Grodal, viewing a film is not a purely mental experience. He suggests that it is only possible to comprehend a film by empathising with the emotions cued in a work, especially with regard to the protagonist's ability to respond to challenging

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<sup>264</sup> See Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1985, pp 50-59.

<sup>265</sup> Michael Rabiger, 1997, p 47.

<sup>266</sup> Nelson Goodman in Thompson, 1988, p10

<sup>267</sup> Torben Grodal, 1997, p 6.

story situations. When we become ‘involved’ in a film, we respond ‘holistically’, employing what Grodal refers to as our “embodied mind”<sup>268</sup> to navigate the conduit between fiction and viewer. According to Grodal, spectators react ‘psychosomatically’, drawing on their senses, intellect, memory, physiology and emotions in combination. In other words, our responses extend well beyond the scope of cognitive mental activity alone, and are regulated by emotional “tones”.<sup>269</sup> Physical reactions such as heartbeat, pulse rate, sweat glands and muscle tension all play a part. For instance, we may react involuntarily to violent action; we may reel from a punch, jump with fright, turn away from the screen in revulsion, or even feel the need to be physically sick. Grodal insists that “‘full flavoured’ emotions need the resonance of bodily reactions”,<sup>270</sup> just as they also rely on cognitive evaluation. He further contends that emotional bonding between humans (in art as in everyday life), is closely aligned with cognition because it has positive evolutionary value. By empathising with others (including the characters in films), we improves our chances of attaining a sophisticated level of interaction with the world, and hence an improved capability for surviving its traumas. The emotions are particularly significant in narrative comprehension because, as with textual meaning, “feelings and emotions are states and processes in humans, not in texts.”<sup>271</sup>

Stepping outside of accepted conventions to employ defamiliarised formal patterning in the disclosure of events, is apt to emphasise emotive rather than mimetic *equivalence*. After all, a cinema audience are not invited to judge whether, either by means of deep focus cinematography or invisible editing, the approach of a particular film is a successful representation of some Bazinian conception of a ‘real’ event.<sup>272</sup> Rather, the film proposes in the interplay of stylistic devices, a cinematic melange which cues the spectator to identify with Barthes’ “effect of the real”<sup>273</sup> on an emotional level. To illustrate this point, Maya

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<sup>268</sup> Torben Grodal, 1997, p 1.

<sup>269</sup> **Torben Grodal, 1997, p 6.**

<sup>270</sup> Torben Grodal, 1997, p 4.

<sup>271</sup> Torben Grodal, 1997, p 3.

<sup>272</sup> see André Bazin, 1955, p 54.

<sup>273</sup> Roland Barthes in Easthope, 1993, p1.

Deren described Meshes in the Afternoon as being “concerned with the interior experiences of an individual . . . It does not record an event that could be witnessed by other persons. Rather it reproduces the way in which the sub-conscious of an individual will develop, interpret and elaborate an apparently simple and casual incident into a critical emotional experience.”<sup>274</sup> Under such a strategy, we the audience are handed an opportunity to construct ourselves in the play of the text; in the course of which, we may become assured that *we are in fact the hero* (or anti-hero) of the film ourselves.<sup>275</sup> In important senses, *each one of us are the subject of every film*.

A cinema audience does not really go to see the film, it goes to see into itself, to imagine, think and feel as others do.<sup>276</sup>

Rabiger’s accident is an extreme but illuminating illustration of the hold which emotional cognizance maintains over perception. However in filmic terms, such acute emotional simulation might be approached by less extreme means if we were to invert the emotion-perception equation. If emotional involvement results in conspicuous *patterns* of perception and cognition, perhaps the reverse might also be possible. Indeed, the introduction of pronounced stylistic patterning as a means of inducing *primary* emotional responses (especially where such devices facilitate narrative interaction / construction on the part of the viewer), has been a motivating factor throughout the development of film language. For the neoformalist analyst, appropriately defamiliarised formal patterning generates a marked level of engagement with a film text at a preconscious level of awareness. For the viewer, the need for conscious interpretation is circumvented (especially on first viewing), by virtue of the fact that the structured presentation of an event is not consciously ‘sensed’. The formal triggering of emotional equivalence between spectator and protagonist inclines the viewer *inside* the vortex of the dramatic milieu.

What [the audience] remember is not the editing, not the camerawork, not the

<sup>274</sup> Maya Deren in Sitney, 1979, p 9.

<sup>275</sup> David Mamet, 1991, p 38.

<sup>276</sup> Michael Rabiger, 1997, p 12.

performances, not even the story - its how they felt.<sup>277</sup>

### Specificity

Minho Woo's short film, Who Killed Jesus ? (2000), proceeds along broadly classical lines until the pivotal moment of the drama. The scene in question centres on a doctor's inability to diagnose two psychiatric patients because of their imagined connection with a murder he committed as a child. In order to highlight the doctor's sliding towards the inappropriate pole of the good - evil antithesis, a single uncut camera movement tracks between the doctor and the two alleged psychotics who are alternately transposed, despite inhabiting separate locked rooms. The shot violates the spatio temporal world of everyday perception (and of conventional film language) by combining discrete locations and times in a single unbroken shot. For the spectator, it is a confusing moment. The disorienting break with established logic induces (as in Rabiger's accident) a state in which the emotions function cognitively: in which the work of art is encountered through the feelings as well as through the senses. The symbolic tracking motif forges a kind of conduit along which the emotional responses of the spectator become broadly equivalent to the emotions depicted in the protagonist on screen.

Using unconventional formal patterning as a vehicle, the film cues the spectator to experience the turmoil felt by the protagonist 'unequivocally', as a consequence of confronting sensory disarray in themselves. Rather than simply communicating the character's ordeal using classical devices, the film complicates its telling in an attempt to situate the spectator's cognitive activities 'inside' the dramatic event. While the doctor attempts to project deceit onto his patients, he merely uncovers deceit in himself; until he finds himself unable to assimilate the sensory data which threatens to unravel his precarious logic. So too for the viewer: the

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<sup>277</sup> Walter Murch, 2001, p 18.

singular formal treatment functions narratively to prevent us from distinguishing between different locations, times and characters. Using the strident tactic of *baring an artistic device*,<sup>278</sup> a film 'asks' its audiences to grapple with unconventional techniques, or at the very least, to contend with familiar techniques in unlikely circumstances. Artistic motivation<sup>279</sup> thusly applied tends to signal abstract connections in a text, and ordinarily only attains prominence when conventional stylistic devices are backgrounded. The precise effect achieved in this instance, could not be approximated had the sequence been shot in a conventionally understandable (and comparatively familiar) shot-reverse-shot<sup>280</sup> fashion. The innovative deployment of an otherwise unremarkable tracking technique encapsulates the entire premise of the film - that doctors have no *essential* jurisdiction over patients - by artfully signalling the protagonist's hypocritical motives, using abstract camera movement as the vehicle. An initially inexplicable (yet in retrospect, supremely relevant) stylistic device triggers a preconscious desire in the spectator for an explanation as to the break with conventional film language.

Invariably, the intentional baring of an artistic device is specific to the medium. For example, the *precise* effect outlined above could only be approximated in literature or the theatre by *different* means. In this instance, it is *distinctively cinematic*. That is to say, the individual (not necessarily exclusively filmic) elements of action, performance, costume, make-up, pictorial composition, lighting, camera movement, art direction, music and editing (amongst others) combine to create an exclusive "cinematic"<sup>281</sup> form of aesthetic interaction which is achievable only in the medium of cinema. *It is in this arena that the most accomplished of short fiction films, excel.*

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<sup>278</sup> Kristin Thompson, 1981, pp 35 -37.

<sup>279</sup> Kristin Thompson, 1981, pp 35 -36.

<sup>280</sup> see Bordwell & Thompson, 1998, pp 288 - 292.

<sup>281</sup> Malcolm Le Grice, 2001, p 6

## Conclusion

### An Aesthetics of Brevity

For Walter Benjamin, the sacredness of an artwork's "aura"<sup>282</sup> was bound to the location of its creation, whether it be cave, altar, cathedral, palace or grand residence. However during the 19th century, as the power of the church and aristocracy gave way to bourgeois democracy, the work of art became more of a commodity than a sacred object.<sup>283</sup> Eventually supposedly lower 'genres' encroached on the previously unassailable hegemony of higher ones. Traditional academies were unable to resist the challenge from emerging antithetical factions. The appreciation of 'lesser' artworks was transmuted by their new currency and "portable easel painting brought with it a naturalism and intimacy which triumphed over the 'great machines' of the nineteenth century".<sup>284</sup> In the current climate of uncertainty brought about by the digital revolution, the prevalence of short filmmaking represents a strikingly analogous basis for interrogating the overworked codes and enfeebled audience responses which flow from the established commercial cinema. The short film format, with its lack of commercial impediments, comparative accessibility and new found possibilities for exhibition, is a mode of cinema practice which is uniquely placed to expand the grammar of cinema.

We could argue at length whether a film like Wind is a fiction film or an experimental film. In the catalogue of the 1997 Aarhus Short Film Festival, Denmark it is described as experimental. By contrast, John Lawlor's Sunday (1988), which also consists of a single uncut tracking shot, is described as drama - because it facilitates *identification* with its characters?<sup>285</sup> In the avant-garde film, experimentation and

<sup>282</sup> Walter Benjamin, 1936, p 215.

<sup>283</sup> see Walter Benjamin, 1936, p 228.

<sup>284</sup> A. L. Rees, 1999, p 7.

<sup>285</sup> see Johannes Riis, 1998, www

novelty are frequently seen as ends in themselves.<sup>286</sup> But *Wind* is not simply an abstract exploration of purely formal non-narrative structures. It does not “thumb its nose at [conventional] meaning”<sup>287</sup> in the way the overtly experimental film does. On the contrary, the 360 degree tracking shot in *Wind* has a specific narrative function which poses questions, evokes suspense and invites interpretation. Its unorthodox mixing of both narrative and anti-narrative devices, enables us as spectators to make connections in a variety of ways which are more meaningful than the sum of predetermined individual approaches.

Emphasising the specificity of the medium has traditionally been a hallmark of the avant-garde film, and to a much lesser extent, of the art cinema. As we have established throughout this study, the contemporary short fiction film is closely related to both categories. Yet it remains distinctive. The constraints involved in short filmmaking, foster a distillation of narrational and experimental techniques which combine to produce a distinctive *aesthetics of brevity*. (What Gareth Evans identifies as “crystalline creations of precise prismatic intensity”<sup>288</sup> in which “all elements are amplified, not reduced.”<sup>289</sup>) Short films may not demand radically new theoretical frameworks than those of previously established categories of the cinema, but it is evident that shorts represent a unique mode of film practice possessing a discrete historical existence and a distinct set of formal objectives. *The central mechanisms and parameters of failure and success, especially with regard to the emotional engagement of a viewer, become more noticeable in short films than in other forms.*<sup>290</sup> For this reason alone the contemporary short fiction film warrants consideration as an important and distinct mode of cinema practice.

While the 20th century was notable for the increasing significance of the masses in cultural life,<sup>291</sup> as we begin the 21st century, it is as yet unclear exactly how (and perhaps more importantly, where) film exhibition will develop as a social

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<sup>286</sup> see Johannes Riis, 1998, www

<sup>287</sup> Richard Raskin, 2002, p118.

<sup>288</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xi.

<sup>289</sup> Gareth Evans in Elsey & Kelly, 2002, p xi.

<sup>290</sup> see Johannes Riis, 1998, www

<sup>291</sup> Walter Benjamin, 1936, p 216.

event. It is impossible even to forecast how films will be disseminated and received in twenty year's time. As the internet settles into the psyche of the general public, Screen Digest predicts that broadband internet access, will be more than twice as important as the cinema in terms of revenue by 2006.<sup>292</sup> We can speculate endlessly about whether the cinema will remain distinct from televisual and computer media, but one thing which seems certain is that celluloid will not survive for much longer as an exhibition medium. Digital cinemas are already a reality; a development which can only be good news for short films, since the need for expensive show prints (which cost more than most production budgets) is eliminated.<sup>293</sup> Improvements to the internet and the advent of dvd have resulted in additional, although fragmented non-theatrical markets and several organisations, most notably Brit Shorts<sup>294</sup> are pioneering the streaming of short films over the internet.

In 1997, Matt Boysons set up the Short Film Bureau<sup>295</sup> to address the lack of infrastructure for short film distribution in the UK. While there can be little doubt that short filmmaking supply currently outstrips demand, the Short Film Bureau claims that the apparent lack of interest in shorts is down to the potential viewing public's "illiteracy"<sup>296</sup> about the format, especially in comparison to their relative depth of knowledge as regards feature film genres, television dramas, sitcoms and soaps. Sadly, innovative shorts are often dismissed as hopelessly self indulgent by the viewing public - a charge which compounds their status as one of the least understood and consequently least exhibited forms of cinema today. Boysons believes that this Catch-22 situation ensures that cinema audiences do not go to see what they have not already been exposed to.<sup>297</sup> Meanwhile in Germany, the Short Film Agency, Hamburg has been operating a distribution service for cinemas since 1994. By 1998, over a hundred and eighty cinemas were regular customers;<sup>298</sup> an achievement which the Short Film Bureau is seeking to emulate.

<sup>292</sup> see [www.screendigest.com](http://www.screendigest.com)

<sup>293</sup> see Lenny Lipton, 1983, p 343.

<sup>294</sup> see <http://www.britshorts.com>

<sup>295</sup> see <http://www.shortfilmbureau.com>

<sup>296</sup> Matt Boysons, 1998, p 10.

<sup>297</sup> see Matt Boysons, 1998, p 10.

<sup>298</sup> Matt Boysons, 1998, p 11.

They have already secured exposure for short films in a bewildering array of settings: on mainstream television, cable and satellite television, in-flight entertainment, ferries, trains, coaches and even in catering establishments. They are further exploring prisons, hospitals and children's and OAP charities as potential exhibition outlets, as well as pushing for the inclusion of shorts at the beginning of commercial video and dvd releases.<sup>299</sup>

It is already commonplace in New Zealand and Canada to be able to rent themed video and dvd compilations of shorts from local video shops.<sup>300</sup> The widespread marketing and distribution in April, 2003 of a dvd compilation of British shorts entitled Cinema16 represents a similar move in the UK.<sup>301</sup> Producer Luke Morris devised a novel way of promoting his own film Je T'aime John Wayne (2000), by presenting it along with a selection of 'classic' British shorts in a high quality format.<sup>302</sup> The collection, in which each film can be viewed with accompanying commentary from its respective director, includes Ridley Scott's Boy and Bicycle (1958), John Smith's The Girl Chewing Gum (1976), Mike Leigh's The Short and Curlies (1987) and Christopher Nolan's Doodlebug (1997). This is a rare example of short films being made available in regular high street outlets in the UK. There are however precursors in the 'portmanteau' film, a recent example of which, Ten Minutes Older - The Trumpet (2002) features a series of ten minute films by Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog and Jim Jarmusch. Similarly, Sky TV's Tube Tales (1999) is a themed compilation of short films, set on the London underground, and directed by well known actors such as Ewan McGregor and Bob Hoskins. It is likely that the trend will continue with many shorts festivals such as Brief Encounters exploring the opportunities for releasing dvd compilations of award winning shorts. This type of shorts compilation has already been available in the United States for some time in the form of the Short International Release dvd 'magazine' series which regularly includes a selection of Cannes and Sundance festival winners. The latest short film

<sup>299</sup> see Matt Boysons, 1998, p 10.

<sup>300</sup> see Matt Boysons, 1998, p 11.

<sup>301</sup> see <http://www.cinema16.co.uk>

<sup>302</sup> Sandi Chaitram, 2003, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/films>

compilation to appear on the UK retail market is 11.09.01 (2002) which features work by Ken Loach, Claude Lelouch and Sean Penn as well as a number of non-Western filmmakers.

On January 27th 2004, the organisers of the Cannes Film Festival issued a press release announcing the launch of a new festival market, dedicated exclusively to short films. The organisers envisage that the "Short Film Corner" will become an important means by which short films can "play an invigorating part in the film industry by putting them in direct contact with production, distribution and broadcasting networks."<sup>303</sup> While such developments in non-theatrical exhibition constitute grounds for optimism, it has to be emphasised that the stream of revenue generated from such enterprises is unlikely ever to be enough to fund the making of films. (Filmfour Lab for example is able to offer only £120 per minute for UK television rights.<sup>304</sup> ) What appears more certain in the immediate future, is that the promotion, marketing, distribution and exhibition machinery of the seven giant Hollywood conglomerates (Buena Vista/Disney, 20th Century Fox, MGM/United Artists, Paramount, Sony/Columbia TriStar, Universal Studios (including Dreamworks) and Warner Brothers<sup>305</sup> ), will continue to exert a stranglehold on the entire practice of filmmaking.

Regardless, short films remain as important and relevant as they were at the very beginning of cinema. Inventive shorts will continue to be made in numbers; even if they remain out of sight for the majority of us - for the time being. Emerging filmmakers, like Samira Makhmalbaf, argue that "as filmmaking becomes as inexpensive as writing, the centrality of capital in the creative process will be radically diminished . . . [to the extent that] the cinema of the 20th century will become the literature of the 21st century."<sup>306</sup> As if to fulfil Chinese filmmaker, Jia Zhangke prediction that "the return of the amateur film era is just around the corner",<sup>307</sup> short film societies like Peeping Toms, the Halloween Society and the

<sup>303</sup> Short Film Corner, www

<sup>304</sup> see Paul Gallagher, 1999, p 11.

<sup>305</sup> see Search & Wistreich, 2002, p 1.

<sup>306</sup> Samira Makhmalbaf, 2000, p 5-6.

<sup>307</sup> Jia Zhangke, 2003, p 132.

Exploding Cinema are providing increasing input into mainstream events like the London International Film Festival.<sup>308</sup>

What the resurgent shorts share in common with the early cinema is their embodiment of the lifeblood and promise of the cinema medium. Inventive short films continue to inhabit an invigorating space where cinema, art and life overlap; where ambiguous, even contradictory meaning is enabled to flourish without recourse to the overarching narrative certainties associated with the mainstream commercial feature film; certainties which have historically harassed, oppressed and destroyed that which they did not encompass. We stand not at the end of the short film's first century of invisibility, but at the threshold of its future history of prevalence - which has only just begun.

Somehow we stay alive, we limp along as we wait for the blockbuster to reach critical mass and implode. In the rubble and ruins of Hollywood, we will emerge to baffle and bemuse that pre-programmed audience.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> see Philip Ilson, 1999, p 14.

<sup>309</sup> John Boorman, 2003, p 19.

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Play (2000), Dir: **Anthony Minghella**, 15 mins, 35mm, Colour, UK.

Camera (2000), Dir: **David Cronenberg**, 5 mins, 35mm, Colour, USA.

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Eight (1998), Dir: **Stephen Daldry**, Super-16mm, 13 mins, Colour, UK.

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