

Understanding contemporary short films

Read the following article by Symon Quay, which originally appeared in *Media Magazine* no 11, February 2005 (<www.mediamagazine.org.uk>).

In short supply

There's a growing interest in short films at the start of this century. The digital generation are getting their hands on more cheaply available equipment and finding new audiences for their visions through web-streaming. Symon Quay reckons that, in the right hands, small ones can be more juicy ...

An alternative to the feature film

Film production companies aim to make standard feature-length films of 100 minutes. This is for industrial reasons rather than artistic ones. Mainstream *exhibition* is structured around two-hour slots – so cinemas can maximise the number of screenings they can get on each 'print' they have rented from a movie distributor. It's not uncommon for there to be up to five screenings a day, ideally at 1pm, 3pm, 5pm, 7pm and 9pm. These two-hour slots allow time for customers to visit concessions stands and see the advertisements and trailers which precede each showing. This formula maximises a cinema's profits. Return on investment will always be the central concern of the cinema business, but does this lead to a homogenisation of the film 'product' and a commercialisation of the movie-going experience that will ultimately turn the punters off? Certainly, the 'B' movie or short film screening that frequently preceded the 'main picture' has become a thing of the past under such financial imperatives. Just rarely though, a film short might be needed to 'make up the minutes' in a programme, as confirmed by short-films co-ordinator Damian Spandley from City Screen: 'With a 90-minute feature we wouldn't usually run anything longer than ten minutes, and we wouldn't programme anything with a two-hour film.'

How short is short?

Depict! is an organisation that challenges aspiring film-makers to produce films within 90 seconds. The popularity of this annual contest shows the growing number of digital film-makers and proves that 'micro-movies' can deliver many of the qualities and strengths of longer forms as well as adding some of their own. Though the term 'short film' might be applied to any film of less than 'standard' duration, a consensus is emerging within the industry at the start of the 21st-century that the form should be no longer than 30 minutes. As far as the content of short films is concerned, there is the same variety and diversity that their fuller-length counterparts provide. If the

feature film has come to represent the novel, then the short film might be considered as the literary equivalent of the poem or short story. The best short films are 'crystalline creations of precise, prismatic intensity'; and films which offer the careful 'refinement' of the director's idea; the distilled essences of his/her imagination.

The forms and functions of the short film

The purposes and styles of short films should be seen to be multifarious. Compare, for instance, the short films produced by directors like Robert Rodriguez that are used to complement the DVD releases of feature-length movies and tempt buyers with the promise of added-value and those that are broadcast in late-night, speciality slots on television. The flexibility of the short film is perhaps its greatest asset; it crosses the boundaries of all categories of film production. Propaganda, advertising, documentary, music video, animation and the avant-garde are all areas where the short film has made its mark.

Short film production has been a laboratory for experimentation and innovation. For many of those who have worked on successful films, their 'visions of light' have been a passport to the vocations associated with feature-length production work. Short films are frequently considered to be an apprenticeship for feature-length filmmaking. It is high time that they were considered an art form in their own right and exploited for their untapped potential in both commercial and educational terms.

A short history of the short film

Short film has a history as old as film itself. The first films, from the earliest days of primitive cinema, were brief, experimental sequences that are very different from what we might now consider films to be. These short films were silent, apart from the noise generated by the mechanical devices that enabled viewers to see them. The role played by early film shorts merits closer attention, not least for their significant contribution to the development of the visual language and grammar of film spectatorship that we have come to accept as conventional today.

Short film was, however, soon eclipsed by the emergence of the dominant mode of film production: the classical realist narrative, feature-length movie. This dominance was reinforced by the genre production of the Hollywood studio system and attempts by other national cinemas to compete with what has become the imperial currency of cinema admissions. Thus, from the thirties onwards, short film production, in commercial terms at least, became a marginalised activity usually operative only within certain restricted-budget constituencies or around the peripheral activities associated with

mainstream film production. Industrial factors influencing short film production led to a near-invisible status within the realm of popular culture.

Avant-garde and experimental cinemas have traditionally taken a strong interest in short film, but opportunities for the theatrical exhibition of non-narrative film dwindled from the fifties onwards. Television promised the potential for a more stable market for short film from the sixties, but this proved to be a false dawn – the more homogenised and commercially viable products of the documentary and the drama series came to dominate the schedules throughout the seventies and eighties. Short films became minority viewing, scheduled into ‘filler’ and late-night slots, and their presence in the schedules was more likely attributable to the enterprise and zeal of individual directors, rather than the commissioning agency of the television industry.

The future of short films

Short films are now emerging from the shadows of the past to find new places in the media spotlight. The convergence of media forms has contributed greatly to these new circumstances, as have modern marketing strategies which narrowcast to *niche* and special-interest audiences. Film festivals and the retail-industry drive to create new product-lines to market to consumers are also taking a significant role in shorts films’ increasing visibility.

Onedotzero is an Arts Council-funded organisation that promotes new computer-generated shorts and the use of new technology in film. It takes its annual festival on tour each year and is about to distribute its third DVD of shorts.

Brief Encounters Short Film Festival, held at the Watershed arts cinema in Bristol, is now in its tenth year. It has grown from a regional-interest festival to become an international showcase for the industry and this year was opened by the director Anthony Minghella. In some ways Minghella was an odd choice of celebrity as his films are typically longer than the standard commercial product: *The English Patient* is 160 minutes and *Cold Mountain* is 154 minutes. Perhaps the fact that the festival can now attract a director of his status within the industry is evidence of a growing respect for the artistry of the short film form and, significantly, its commercial potential.

Three directors who have successfully bridged the forms of the short film, the music video and full-length movies got together to release showcase DVDs of their work. Spike Jonze, Chris Cunningham and Michel Gondry formed the Directors’ Label and have released their work to both critical acclaim and commercial success. These releases have been massively successful as they are able to tap into several cross-over markets: music, film and video art.

London-based short-film producer Luke Morris has put together three collections called Cinema 16 that showcase films from British, European and American directors. The British DVD sold more than 5,000 copies in the UK in less than 12 months, which is more than a typical foreign-language feature would be expected to sell over the same period. A compilation of Indian short films is rumoured to be his next project. 'When you think of the number of young short filmmakers working today, there's a captive audience who want to analyse these films,' states Morris.

Certainly, new developments like the Digital Shorts initiative launched by the UK Film Council have radically altered the likelihood of securing both funding and distribution for new film shorts. This three-year scheme has supported digital short films since August 2001, with the council pledging £1.5 million to produce 100 films each year. Funds were to be matched by regional partners, each film was to be shot solely on digital for less than £10,000, and each film had to be less than ten minutes long. This might have offended purists who prefer filmstock as their medium, but it has opened up possibilities that might never have existed without state support. As James Bell writes:

Whatever digital's detractors and supporters might argue, it is indisputable that the medium has allowed more shorts to be made. The availability of cheap equipment, from cameras to desktop editing suites, has democratised film-making so it's quite feasible to shoot a no-budget short with a basic DV camera, edit the film at home on a computer editing package and then present it to one of the short-film schemes as a calling-card to secure funding for a more ambitious work or to distribute it via the web.

Further reading

Bell, James: *Eat My Shorts* article in *Sight & Sound*, May 2004
Else, Eileen and Kelly, Andrew: *In Short: A Guide to Short Film-making in the Digital Age*, BFI, 2002
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Filmography

American Short Shorts, Pacific Voice, 2002
The Work of Director Spike Jonze, Directors' Label Volume 1, 2003
The Work of Director Chris Cunningham, Directors' Label Volume 2, 2003
The Work of Director Michel Gondry, Directors' Label Volume 3, 2003
Cinema 16 – British Short Films, Momac Films, 2003
Cinema 16 – European Short Films, Momac Films, 2004
Cinema 16 – American Short Films, Momac Films, 2006

Websites

www.filmcentre.co.uk

www.onedotzero.com

www.depict.org

www.brief-encounters.org.uk

Task

Write a précis summarising the article's key points.



How They Got There