

# Instant Impact: Story and Style in the Short Film

By Ryan Shand

'To make short films has become synonymous with attempting the impossible.'<sup>1</sup>

Jean-Luc Godard

'With a short (film) you are allowed to do whatever you want. It's like if you have a girlfriend and she tells you that you can do whatever you want. That's very exciting.'<sup>22</sup>

Gaspar Noé

Why would an ambitious young filmmaker chose to devote their nascent creative energies to the making of short films, rather than diving straight into the deep end and possibly making their investment back in the process? The world of short films is a decidedly odd one, and not as straightforward as it first seems; as the contrasting quotations from the two French filmmakers above illustrates. They are definitely not part of the marketplace, as no mainstream cinema chain in the UK now regularly runs short films before their features. The large number of short films that are made all round the world now find their audiences through a range of outlets: from special programs at the art houses, on occasional television screenings, and also the thousands of websites that have sprung up all over the Internet.

## The Lone Patron

In previous years, it felt like I was the only person who paid to watch programmes of short films at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. Despite the fact that this year there were about 150 shorts shown at this year's festival, compared to about 120 features, no-one could claim that the short film is treated with the same reverence and respect as the features playing alongside them. The blame might be placed variously on the programmers, the film funding agencies, or even the cinema outlets themselves. However, rather than getting lost in another bout of grumbling about cultural institutions, let's do something a little more productive: let's turn our attention to the actual films.

## Lessons From Jean-Luc

To get the film rolling, let's see what one of our cinematic forefather's had to say about the aesthetics of the short film. In February 1959, writing for the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jean-Luc Godard offered some observations on the recent *Fifth International Festival of Short Films at Tours*. He began by pointing out that, 'Short films are rarely written about in *Cahiers*, and some readers have taken us amiably to task for this.'<sup>33</sup> The devoted readers of *The Drouth*, as familiar with Margaret Tait as they are with Enrico Coccozza, could offer no such criticism. However the question is: has the space that has been devoted to the length-challenged offspring of these underemployed filmmakers been justified? Jean-Luc, at least from the evidence of his 1959 piece, would most likely argue that it hasn't. His central criticism of the form, in which he was to spend the next few years establishing his name in the eyes of the French funding agencies, ran as follows:

'A short film does not have the time for an explicit study in depth ... The important point is that in a feature, the film-maker establishes a theorem, whereas in a short he can at best make use of the results of this theorem. To take this to its conclusion: a short film does not have the time to *think*.'<sup>44</sup>





Even though his comments are often rudely dismissed by today's more commercially savvy filmmakers and critics, these words were constantly running through my mind during the short film screenings at the 2007 Edinburgh International Film Festival. I kept wondering if he expecting too much of the form? Maybe it's okay for the film to amuse and hold, rather than to enrapture and provoke reflection. Was it possible that he merely missed the true point of the short film, saddling it with expectations derived from the feature length form, rather than seeing the short film for what it is? These are the wider questions, which will be examined through a couple of more grounded tools; namely the story and style in the films that were screening at this summer's get-together.

### **Troubled Visions**

Okay let's get the obvious points out in the open straight away. During the week and a half that I gave to this expedition into the unknown caves of the cinematic underground, I saw lots of films about alcohol abuse, old people who lead miserable lives, and dying. These characters tend to reside in council tower blocks and constantly swear at each other. Mostly these films are British. Sometimes focusing the film on someone slightly younger, who decided that they would be happier if they killed their parents, as happens in *Waiting For Exit Music* (David Stoddart, *The Arts Institute at Bournemouth*), would combine these interests. *These films tended to be made as final-year graduation projects at film and arts schools all over the country. I have become increasing concerned for*

*the welfare of the young people in these filmmaking hothouses. Just what they are doing to these students to have such a bleak view of the world at such a young age I don't know, but I have also learned that many problems can be solved by going for a walk in the forest. Just make sure you bring a gun with you, there is usually trouble out there ...*

The most hyped anticipated short film of the festival was also of this social realist variety, *Dog Altogether*, the directorial debut of the brilliant young Brit actor Paddy Considine. This film ticks one of the boxes that Mark Kermode outlined in his special segment on the five rules to follow when making a short film on *The Culture Show*, namely, 'Robert De Niro is waiting ... aim high for casting.'<sup>55</sup> Considine's film stars the official face of troubled masculinity in Scotland, Peter Mullen; he plays an alcoholic who is interrupted drinking himself to death in his local by some rowdy pool players. So he attacks them with a pool cue, while they plead, 'I don't know why you're doing this ...'. Quite. Joseph then stubbles into a Christian charity shop staffed by Olivia Colman, where she prays for him, while he cries and hides under some clothes. He then goes home, only to be beaten up by three men out for revenge for an earlier misdemeanour.

It has recently been announced that *Dog Altogether* won the Silver Lion for the Best Short Film at the Venice Film Festival. I can only say don't encourage them. The names of the filmmaker and star must have seduced everyone involved, from Sigma and Warp Films, to the panels of Scottish Screen. This unspoken complacent contract between filmmakers and



public funding bodies is deeply concerning. As Joseph Britta, the writer of the Tartan Short funded sci-fi epic *The Harvest*, which played at last year's EIFF, explained:

'I think a lot of short film writers are definitely not ambitious enough ... They submit stuff that they think people are looking for. It's a Catch 22: people are only commissioning social-realist stuff because that's all they're being sent.'<sup>66</sup>

This lack of ambition seems to be eating away at contemporary grassroots film culture, as evidenced by most of the films emerging from the National Film and Television School. In fact most of this year's UK Shorts 2 were social realist except two: *She Wanted to Be Burnt* (to be discussed below) and the final comedy, *Hard to Swallow* (Mat Kirky). The notable exception to this conformity has to be the London Film School, which has nurtured a more cosmopolitan streak in its various international co-productions. It soon became clear that comic incongruity is the last refuge of the desperate short filmmaker. For evidence of this just see the aforementioned *Hard to Swallow*, where in the last moments a pet bear walks into a dinner party and is treated like a long lost friend by the guests. Luis Buñuel this was not. In his aforementioned *Culture Show* report, the film critic Mark Kermode noted that, 'Quirky is good'. The distance between silly and quirky was aptly demonstrated by the audience reaction to *The One and Only Herb McGwyer Plays Wallis Island* (James Griffiths), one of the best short films on show this summer, and justly winning the UK Film Council Kodak Award for Best British Short Film.

### Scottish Twists

So despite Limmy's brilliant parody of the typical Scottish short film, 'Nothing', on Sanjeev Kohli's BBC2 documentary *10 Things I Hate About the Edinburgh Festival*,<sup>77</sup> I am pleased to report a much healthier and vital strand of filmmaking north of the border. Having survived these tortured visions of contemporary Britain I was delighted to encounter the surrealist vision of Ruth Paxton in *She Wanted To Be Burnt*. This inventive and creative experimentation with image and sound was streets ahead of the pack. A simple enough premise, in which Kim Chapman wanders through fields and dark, dismal rooms in order to escape her psychological torment, managed to impress without story, a trick that is deceptively difficult. Perhaps it promises more than it delivers, but it has the desire to be different, which was in short supply at this year's proceedings.

There is no doubt that Tartan Shorts has had a bad year. There was nothing to match the quality of last year's *Trout* (Johnny Barrington and Anna Duffield), which was co-produced by Sigma Films. This year's sole Tartan Short showing at the festival, *Shell* (Scott Graham), starring the same lead actress, Lorna Craig, was underwhelming in comparison. Great visuals do not make a great film, no matter how much you pay for your crew and production values. Perhaps best described as a contemporary retelling of the neo-realist noir classic

*Osessione* (Luchino Visconti, 1942), with a feminist twist, as seen through the empty eyes of a commercial director. *Shell*, with its drab and insular set up, just failed to sparkle. When it tried to shine it just appeared cynical, as happens when the end credits burst into primary colours, to the tune of the upbeat pop ditty 'Your Kisses Are Wasted On Me', courtesy of The Pipettes. But it's way too late to change its tune now; this is totally out of sync with the rest of the film.

At the lower end of the production scale in Scotland, I am happy to report that the films commissioned by the Glasgow Media Access Centre (GMAC) excelled themselves this year. The real strength of this programme of films was in their diversity. Films that resolutely refuse to be trapped in the social-realist rut that other filmmakers in Britain



cannot seem to escape were represented in the three strands of the GMAC commissioning process, namely Digicult, Cineworks and Little Pictures. The film that perhaps seems closest to this tried and tested formula for short filmmakers, *Kick About* (David Newbigging), about a family who run into a gang while playing football in a council estate, impressed on a number of fronts. The performances by the non-professional teenage actors (from the North Glasgow Community Centres) were vital and arresting. They managed to wring both the tension and the humour out of the standoff. However, most pleasing of all, was the fact that this film was so skilfully cinematic in its camerawork and editing. The situation was brought to life in dynamic camera movements and dramatic cuts that Sergio Leone would enjoy. Ken Loach, please take note.

All sorts of genres were in evidence here, from the special effects showcase of *Bulb* (Arlene Cullum), the activist documentary *Arthur Balfour and Me* (Charlotte Cornic), to the literary adaptation of the Andrew O'Hagan short story *The Missing* (Graham Eatough) by the Glasgow-based theatre company Suspect Culture. However two films were particularly intriguing for me, suggesting as they do fresh directions for short filmmaking in Scotland. Firstly, the lyrical snapshot that is *Then A Summer Starts*, which was written by Yukari Higo and directed by Satsuki Okawa. The film follows the teenage Lily as she wanders round the most picaresque spots in Glasgow's West End, looking for something to catch her affections. Concluding in an almost entirely visual encounter with a boy in a peculiarly old fashioned swimming pool, *Then A Summer Starts* tries to communicate with striking and beautiful images. If ultimately it seems more like a Belle and Sebastian video than a full-blown story, is perhaps due to the sketchy scenario rather than with problems of execution. More successful was Kate Burton's *The Ice Plant*, which at least suggests that the filmmakers know there are locations outside of Glasgow, specifically Lawrencekirk in Aberdeenshire, something that most of films produced by these Glasgow-based schemes seem totally uninterested in. Again centred on a female protagonist, this film features an ice-cube factory worker whose stable and orderly world on the production line is challenged by a new male member of the team. His efforts at making her smile through various visual gags leave her cold at first, before she gradually warms to his off-beat charms. What is surprising about this small comedy is that despite being set in a factory (prime social realist territory after all), rather than telling a

story about the exploitation of labour, it instead evokes the whimsy of the American independent film sensibility. In particular the influence of younger directors such as Wes Anderson has surely helped shape the light comedy aesthetic of this romantic tale.

### National Cinemas in Miniature



The influence of filmic trends in feature film production also seems to have a notable effect on the short film produced by numerous national territories. For example, in the World Shorts programme Korea was represented by the Grand Guignol nuclear holocaust horror-comedy *The Freaking Family* (Park

Soo-young), while New Zealand showcased its Maori past in *War Party* (Tearepa Kahi), an historical drama set deep in its forests, while a highly effective short from Palestine, *Make a Wish* (Cherien Dabis), managed to dramatise the process of mourning for a lost parent form a small tale about the attempts of two children to purchase a birthday cake for their mother. Indeed, the device of seeing adult traumas through the eyes of a child was a recurring motif of the festival; perhaps filmmakers see it as a short-cut to emotion and seriousness in a form that is often so contained in narrative terms. Overall though, despite some exceptions, this reliance on the dominant style of feature films made in their own domestic market means that many shorts have an unavoidably *ingratiating* quality to them. It's as if they have only half an eye on the short film festival circuit, while the rest of the eye and a half is on catching the attention of an established producer in their own country. Such naked careerism does not allow much room for genuine creativity.

The film that really stood out for me amongst this bunch (from the *Trailblazing Shorts I* programme) was interestedly enough not even of the fictional variety. A short about the remote Arctic Circle coal mining village of Barentsburg, in the documentary *Scarlet Sunrise* (Eduard Grau and Edward Edwards, National Film and Television School), was an example of an intriguing idea, executed in an imaginative fashion.





On paper this may sound like the least enticing short film in the world, however what makes it special is the way it captures the sense of space and atmosphere of isolated place through the use of creative cinematic techniques. How could you capture both the joy and absurdity of a bass guitarist in a red vest who plays by himself on-stage because there are no others of a similar mind in a village of only 200 residents? Well you could interview him and let the part-time musician explain the situation. But how about simply filming the player in long shot, so the stage and the hall dwarf his music, and he exists merely as a small figure on a stage? Happily the latter approach is how Grau and Edward's approach the rest of the film, allowing the images of the village to evoke the isolation of living in such a remote and inhospitable part of the world. Yet we are never encouraged to see the residents of this town as victims of Soviet industrialisation and unfeeling bureaucracy; instead I came away amazed at how people can grow attached to a place over time, to the point of it being inconceivable that they could ever live anywhere else. This short achieves most of its power through its images, which is an aesthetic practice more easily in keeping with the limited amount of running time in this format. But coming back to the questions posed at the beginning, how about the filmmakers who have taken on the task of telling a story?

### **Continental Contrivances**

The ability to tell an interesting, emotionally and intellectually satisfying story in such a short time span has always been one of the central challenges to the filmmaker. Going back to the Jean-Luc Godard piece, he acknowledges the problems faced by someone working within this form:

'Art is difficult here, for as we have seen, one must on the one hand introduce a plot to lend it the suspense natural to the full-length film, while on the other one has not enough time to develop this plot with the necessary care. Therefore, since one *must* tell a story, one must take only the beginning and the end – in other words, schematize – which involves the aesthetic risk of making something seem theoretic when one is trying to make it seem living.'<sup>88</sup>

As we turn our attention away from poetic narrative and documentaries, to films that take this narrative challenge head on, these words seem equally true today. Undoubtedly, the most successful examples of short film storytelling at the EIFF were from the continent. A French film about a woman getting lost in the early morning streets of Paris after a one-night stand, when she decides to take her lover's dog for a walk, *Magic Paris* (Alice Winocour), was particularly memorable amongst a flood of more portentous efforts.

After a while it became clear that the single or parallel narrative was the most common means of telling a story in just under a quarter of an hour. Typically, the most effective narrative films would have one establishing scene before



some short titles, then rush towards a development in the middle, before providing a satisfying, yet believable twist at the end. An exemplar in this regard was the Spanish thriller, *The Song of the Cricket* (Dany Campos). What begins as two men discussing the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca over coffee in an innocuous suburban cafe, quickly turns into something much more sinister following the title sequence. We are then unexpectedly plunged into stock gangster film territory, as a man talks on his mobile and a flashy red car is stolen. A cut back to the two men from the first scene gives the impression that their conversation is taking place while these criminals are elsewhere. The next scene in an empty industrial space confuses this logic however, as one of the men from the coffeehouse scene, Bangs, is being talked into killing a former ETA militant and given a gun. It is becoming apparent that in actual fact, Bangs is a hitman, who is being employed by members of ETA who see their actions as necessary to protect the organisation. Fade to black. Next we see the other man from the coffeehouse conversation, Peru, walking down the street. The audience sees that Bangs is following him, and the kind of dramatic tension that Hitchcock was a master of is instantly evoked. As Bangs follows Peru with seemingly unstoppable intents, his best laid plans come undone when, first a woman with a child gets in the way, followed by the police on walkabout. Rather than shoot Peru, Bangs decides to walk past him and abandon his mission. Unexpectedly while doing so, Peru turns and recognises him, and greets Bangs like a long lost friend. As the black comedy of the previously highly charged drama subsides, we learn that the two men are in actual fact childhood friends. Despite being obviously flustered by the situation, Bangs agrees to go for coffee to catch up. Now we find ourselves back to the same table as we encountered at the beginning of the film, only we now understand the deadly drama that is playing out in the undercurrents of this encounter. When Bangs learns that Peru is now married and has a new job, he excuses himself to the bathroom so that he can reassess the situation. However, his mistake is to unknowingly drop the surveillance photo of his target as he gets up. Peru picks the black and white image up and stares at it, while his companion is inspecting his gun in front of the bathroom mirror. When we follow Peru back to the table, Bangs is gone, but the photo is left on the table. He sits down and looks totally deflated. He realises what fate awaits him. Sure enough, the film returns to the red car and the anonymous concrete wasteland seen previously. The criminal who earlier gave Bangs the order to kill is incensed. In one long take, shot from a distance behind the rear of the car, we hear the argument unfold on the soundtrack. As the shouting becomes more heated the camera jerkily moves towards the car; we hear a gunshot and see Peru thrown out as it drives off. The final image is of a close-up of the mobile phone in Peru's jeans. The phone rings, the camera lingers on this image, and the film ends. In many ways this highly effective short thriller confounds the doomsayers of the short film sector. Despite Jean-Luc Godard's pessimism about the space that the format leaves its storytellers, *The Song of the Cricket* manages the magic formula of making the familiar, surprising. As we have seen, this is mostly achieved through the clever use of the opening flash-forward. Such devices are all the evidence that is needed to suggest that these filmmakers know how to grip the audience's attention, negotiate the twists of a story, and bring it to a satisfying resolution. They are obviously ready to move on, and attempt the same feat in the more demanding arena of the feature film format.

### It's Your Stepping Stone

As we have just seen, the problem of closure in the short film is central to the creative challenges faced by all engaged in the form. This point is aptly highlighted in the advertising promotion, 'Small is Beautiful', for the TCM Classic Shorts program at the 2006 London Film Festival, which reads:

'... in today's crowded marketplace, short films can provide a necessary career boost. Get it right, and a punchy, impactful short can be an important stepping stone to feature film-making.'<sup>99</sup>

As we have seen, the key term here is 'impactful'. In formal terms, the aesthetic strategy best suited to the ends being pursued is what we might call *narration condensed*. The characterisation and storyline have to be grasped immediately, as the rest of the film will



need to be given over to the development and resolution of what has been established in the opening scene.

What has become clear is that short filmmaking is mainly an industry activity, consisting of non-profit traders hoping to catch someone's attention with the view to set up their own stall down the line. Despite various initiatives around the country such as the Brief Encounters Short Film Festival in Bristol, or the monthly Magic Lantern in the CCA, Glasgow, short films are still not seen as an artistic pursuit in their own right. The real reason that short film programmes don't draw in the festival crowds is that they are *not made for audiences*. I don't mean that they are so bad that they are not worth even viewing, but that essentially they are made to attract the attention of film producers. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. This is why they are shown at festivals, as festivals are often more about networking than film viewing.

Short filmmaking is currently thriving all around the world, especially in countries where the domestic feature film production struggles to compete with imports. As an alternative to giving up the fight completely, as Duncan Petrie has argued, short film programmes offer at least some comfort and hope that something bolder might emerge from this avalanche of small activities.<sup>10</sup>

What is clear from the shorts that were screened at this year's Edinburgh International Film Festival is that when filmmakers free themselves from the controlling gaze of established expectations, great things can emerge, however briefly.

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, 'Take Your Own Tours' in Milne, Tom (ed.) *Godard on Godard* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> The Internet Movie Database, [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com), profile of Gaspar Noé.

<sup>3</sup> *Godard on Godard*, p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> Broadcast on BBC2 on 1 Dec 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Interview from Paul Whitelaw, 'Short and Sweet', *Scotland on Sunday*, Review Section, Sunday, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2006, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Broadcast on 21 August 2007. See, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGauSDy8e8I>

<sup>8</sup> *Godard on Godard*, p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> *Sight and Sound*, November 2006, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Duncan Petrie, *Screening Scotland*, London: British Film Institute, 2000. Especially, 'The New Significance of Short Films', p. 180-82.

