Understanding the Underlying Principles of the Short Film

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Abstract

This chapter explores the types of story possible within short films, and how often there can be confusion and uncertainty, particularly amongst student filmmakers, about what a short film really is. In order to better understand what a short film is, this chapter outlines a series of underlying principles about short film story design that, we argue, are integral to the initial stages of conceiving a short film. Before script development takes place, we argue that realistic thinking about what the short film can deliver in terms of story, characters, scope and dramatic question, will result in a screen work that is not only feasible to produce for student filmmakers, but is also more likely to increase an audience's emotional engagement with the film. Drawing on a range of multi-award winning contemporary short films to illustrate these principles, we discuss the relationship between content and form in the short film, leading to a better understanding of the parameters in which a student filmmaker might work. While not arguing that these parameters are strict and unbreakable, we argue that knowing what has worked well for others, and what audiences expect from the short film form, provides a solid basis from which to begin conceptualising a short film.

Introduction

University-based screen production education is an unusual pedagogic activity in that educators commonly seek to prepare students to work in the feature film industry yet use the short film – and other short forms, such as the web series, mini-documentaries, music videos, television commercials etc – as the dominant mode of production project students undertake during their education (see Charleson, 2014). Similarly, students entering a university screen production course tend to express an ambition to work in the feature film industry (see Bell, 2004; Bennett, 2009; Thornham & O'Sullivan, 2004) and, generally speaking, have grown up on a diet of feature films (and increasingly, long-form television series) as opposed to short films. By the time these students arrive at university, they have no doubt seen hundreds of feature films, but nowhere near as many short films, let alone 'quality' short films. Consequently, students are in many ways unfamiliar with the parameters of short form film narratives and how they differ from feature film narratives.

Furthermore, the feature films students have seen are typically those released by major distribution companies, or streaming services such as Netflix, Apple iTunes and (in

Australia) STAN, which even with a contemporary focus on popular stories, are still somewhat risk averse in terms of narrative style. In essence, these distribution outlets act as quality control gate-keepers, meaning that the feature films students have seen prior to beginning their screen production education are of particularly high quality. Unfortunately, however, these feature films typically follow popular story and genre formulae, meaning students are unlikely to have been exposed to many non-'Hollywood' films that might experiment with narrative forms and cinematic language. Criteria for such quality are open to debate, of course, but in a more general sense these films have passed gate-keeping of one type or another, whether this is determined by multinational conglomerates or local cinema operators.

The same cannot always be said for the short films that students might have seen, which has typically been through open-access platforms such as YouTube, where there is no quality control gate-keeping. This, then, leads to a situation where students have a more comprehensive, if unconscious, understanding of the fundamental structures of a (successful) feature film than they do of a short film, which can be problematic when they are required to produce short form work as part of their degree program. After all, 'the short script offers writers the opportunity to develop their creative skills and hone craft, as well as a way of having work produced to gain a greater understanding of the script-to-screen relationship' (Batty & Waldeback, 2019, p. XXX).

It is this imbalance of understanding between how feature films and short films function that this chapter addresses, as well as providing a series of underlying principles that are intended to assist students and educators in developing a stronger understanding of the parameters of a short film story. Considering four key cinematic pillars – location, cast, time-frame and dramatic problem – this chapter also uses examples of award-winning short films to illustrate the principles presented. Before turning to these principles and how they can be seen in a sample of produced films, we discuss some of definitions of the short film, and, in particular, how it differs from the feature film.

Defining the Short Film

In their book, Writing the Short Film, (2000) Pat Cooper and Ken Dancyger help to define the short film by touching on some of the key differences between it and the feature film:

> The long-form, or feature-film, has a definite set of qualities beyond its physical length. There are particular expectations of character, complexity of plot, presence of

a subplot, or secondary story line, and a particular structure (generally called a three-act structure) … [and] there are numerous secondary characters (pp. 4-5).

Cooper and Dancyger's idea of "particular expectations" is framed from an audience perspective. Audiences, they argue, come to feature films with certain expectations regarding the psychological and emotional complexity of the characters, and the depth of emotional problems characters need to overcome by the end of the film. Furthermore, they believe that audiences have similar expectations regarding the complexity of the overall narrative, and how a significant amount of time is required for the questions posed by the narrative to be fully explored and resolved. When we add to this secondary characters, who each might have minor story arcs, the two-hour duration is quickly consumed. In summary, Cooper and Dancyger argue that it is both the nature and quantity of internal elements that determine a the length of a film.

Linda J. Cowgill (2005) shares these views. She argues that it is not uncommon for short film writers to unwittingly begin projects with story ideas that are far too big to fit the short film form. Stories that are overly complex and multi-layered take far more time to unravel, and build to a satisfying ending, than the short film form is able to offer.

Many of the concepts for the short film screenplay (1 to 40 pages) are the same for writing a feature (90 to 130 pages), but there are major differences. Not only do shorts differ from the feature films in the size and scope of the drama, but in plot structure, too […] Short films can focus on the conflict in one incident to great effect, but features focus on any number of incidents (Cowgill, 2005, pp. 10-11).

Here Cowgill highlights some of the differences between feature films and short films with regard to the number of major incidents upon which the plot is based. Short films, she argues, only have sufficient time to focus on a single major incident, if the film intends on exploring that major incident in sufficient depth to significantly affect the audience on an emotional level. Given that feature films have considerably more screen time, they are able to explore numerous major incidents that build upon each other in a causal way, to create a more entwined narrative that results in a greater emotional pay-off, usually via the character arc (see Batty, 2011).

For Dan Gurkis (2007), there is more to a short film than simply being shorter than a feature film. He argues that everything about the short film is sufficiently different to the feature film as to warrant it being considered as a unique creation in its own right. Gurkis argues:

It's important to understand that a short film is not simply a shorter version of a feature film any more than a short story is a shorter version of a novel or a song is a shorter version of a symphony. The way that a short film is conceptualized, written, produced, and directed is very different from that of its feature-length counterpart (Gurkis, 2007, p. 3).

For Gurkis, it is not just the form that makes short films different to feature films, but the entire conception, pre-production and post-production process. He argues that everything about how a short film is made is sufficiently different to a feature film to warrant thinking that short films are more different to feature films than they are similar, other than they are both narrative works of screen fiction. Yet, for the student filmmaker there is only so much that is helpful about being told what something is not. To be told that a short film is different to a feature film, and to have some of those differences described in generalised terms, might help to clarify what the short film is not – but what is a short film? What are the uniquely inherent qualities that drive its creation?

Cooper and Dancyger's observation that audiences have 'particular expectations of character, complexity of plot, presence of a subplot' (2000, p. 4) does not fully illustrate what an audience's expectations of a short film might be. Or, Cowgill's assertion that "short films can focus on the conflict in one incident to great effect, but features focus on any number of incidents" (2005, p. 11) again does not fully articulate whether or not the scale of the "one incident" is a crucial consideration. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy was a single incident, but it is hard to image being able to do the story justice in a short film. While 'a short film is not simply a shorter version of a feature film' (Gurkis, 2007, p. 3) might tell us how not to conceptualise the narrative of a short film, it does not tell us how we should go about conceptualising a short film.

Why the Short Film is Like a Motorbike

Misunderstanding the basic structural differences between short films and feature films can lead students to try and create what is, in essence, a feature film story within a short film format without realising it. In many ways, from the perspective of story, on the surface short films do not appear that different to feature films: they both tell fictional screen stories employing a cinematic, character based, narrative style. In reality, however, the short film is a form with its own unique requirements: it is not a condensed version of a feature film.

From our own teaching of the short film form to students over many years, we have found that the following analogy can help students better understand what a short film is, rather than what a short film is not. Although the analogy does not cover the full gamut of every type of short film, it does, we believe, cover the majority of short film types that students filmmakers are likely to make early in their careers.

> A short film is to a feature film as a motorbike is to a car. Both a motorbike and a car have the following elements: wheels, engine, clutch, brakes, indicators, lights, horn, exhaust, muffler, ignition system, seats and so on. Although a motorbike shares many of the same elements as a car, in many ways it is nothing like a car. While both are modes of transport that are driven on roads, they are completely different vehicles. For example, a motor bike can only legally transport up to two passengers, or three if a side-car is attached (just like a short film, which generally has a few characters), while a car can transport five or even seven passengers depending on its size (just like a feature film, which can have several key characters). Thus, although a short film has many of the elements of a feature film – characters, story, locations, cinematography, editing, production design, soundtrack, musical score, and so on – in many other ways a short film is fundamentally different to a feature film.

The strength of this analogy, we feel, is that it highlights those cinematic elements that students can easily recognise, such as characters, locations, cinematography, editing, production design, soundtrack and musical score, and it draws attention to the fact that although short films and feature films share all these common elements, they can still be very different types of screen work. This analogy also makes apparent that just like a motorcycle is structurally different to a car, so a short film is structurally different to a feature film – not just shorter/smaller.

In her article reflecting on her own practice, filmmaker Mieke Bal relates this point to a short film she made in which she experimented with varying durations:

> The other distinction I find hard to maintain is that between content and form. I never believed the two are separable, and this conviction makes me, in the eyes of those who do maintain a separation, a formalist. In my experiments with the short on emotional capitalism I think it was precisely the attempt to separate them a bit, and make the 24-minute film a non-narrative, descriptive, perhaps essayistic one, that caused the lack of enthusiasm. In the ten-minute one, after restoring narrative – a form, after all – the content works better. Hence, no distinction (2015, p. 17).

Here Bal acknowledges that attempting to extend the duration of the film beyond the requirements of the story resulted in a lack of enthusiasm, or emotional engagement, in the film. By bringing the film back to ten-minutes, well within a 'typical' short film duration, her content worked better. In other words, the film became more emotionally engaging. Bal also recognises that unity between the content and the film's form is important. Although she

describes herself as a formalist, she concedes that it is not so much a strict sense of formalism she is applying, but rather that by working to 'fit' the story into the ten-minute duration, she was able to eliminate everything but the story's essential elements. This helped to condense and clarify the story, which in turn made it more thematically potent and emotionally engaging. Ultimately, Bal was able to discover a more balanced harmony between the story (the content) and the length of the film (the form) by bringing the film's duration back within the length of a 'typical' short film.

There is a great variety within the short film form, much of which is impacted by duration, which makes understanding its fabric, and thus its creative development, even more complicated. Feature films commonly run for between eighty-minutes and two hours, while the duration of short films is far more varied. For example, a twenty-minute short film is five-times (or 500%) longer than a four-minute short film. In the world of feature films, that would be the equivalent of comparing a ten-hour film with one that ran for two-hours. There are also short films that last for two-minutes or less, which makes them up to ten times shorter than the twenty-minute film. Clearly, then, story parameters – as well as production possibilities – are vitally important to consider in relation to duration: imagine, for example, an ensemble cast drama set at a wedding reception that only lasts for ninety seconds. It would be surprising to suggested that the typical three-act structure of the two-hour feature film could also be applied to both the four-minute short or the ten-hour feature – even if the general movement of the story, from establishing the world, to inciting incident to resolution of all complications, might feel the same.

What do we Really Mean by Short?
In order to better understand how content and form function, and vary, in short films of different durations, it is worth investigating the four categories of short film proposed by Gurkis (2007, p. 4): the short-short film, the conventional short film, the medium short film and the long short film. These are described below in more detail:

Short-short	• 2-4 minutes in length • built upon a single, clear dramatic action with one crisis • usually 1-2 major scenes
Conventional short	• 7-12 minutes in length • built upon a single, clear dramatic action with one or more crisis • usually 5-8 major scenes

Medium short	• 20-25 minutes in length • built upon a more complex dramatic action with multiple crises • usually underscored by a B-plot • approximately 12-15 major scenes
Long short	• 30 minutes in length • built upon a more complex dramatic action with multiple crises • usually underscored by a well-developed B-plot • approximately 20-30 major scenes, depending on the overall length of the screenplay

Firstly, it is worth noting that there are significant time gaps between each category: three minutes between the short-short and the conventional short, eight minutes between the conventional short and the medium short, and five minutes between the medium short and the long short. Gurkis does not suggest that filmmakers should be rigid with these time frames – 'Filmmaking is not engineering', he says, and 'A six-minute film may more closely resemble a short-short in its structure, even though its running time suggests something more complex (Gurkis, 2007, p. 5) –rather, it is the duration, complexity of story and number of major scenes that are closely related. As the film's duration extents, so does the need for greater complexity of story and character, and an increase in the number of major scenes.

Although Gurkis does not explicitly articulate it, he is drawing comparisons between content and form. In his categories, form shapes content, such as a six-minute film's running time equating to a more complex story than that of a four-minute film. In reality, however, the six-minute film might not be more complex than the four-minute film, but rather, more drawn out or not as tightly edited as it could be. We agree with Gurkis' proposition that 'a single, clear dramatic action with one crisis' only has so much dramatic life built into it and thus can only sustain an audience's emotional engagement for so long. Being able to identify how much dramatic life a single, clear dramatic action with one crisis contains is key to understanding how suitable that story idea is for a short film, and into which of the four categories it is best suited.

With our main focus here on the student filmmaker, we are primary concerned with Gurkis' short-short and conventional short categories, as these are typically the duration of the films made during degree programs. Medium and long-short films are generally the reserve of the more experienced filmmaker, who also has access to greater resources, time and funding. According to Gurkis, the short-short is built upon a single, clear dramatic action

with one crisis, while the convention short can have one or more crises. He believes there is only sufficient time in a short-short or conventional short for one major crisis: because 'of the brevity of short films, an important characteristic of any successful one is an economy of expression … there's simply not enough screen time to show everything … It's the reason that short films, more than feature-length films, often succeed or fail at the conceptual level' (Gurkis, 2007, p. 5). This relates to Bal's idea of form driving content, and as a result, how and to what extent emotional engagement is achieved.

A major stumbling block for the student filmmaker is understanding what a single, clear dramatic action with one crisis looks like at a conceptual level and how a story can be built around it. It is not uncommon for creators of short films to begin working with a single crisis that is simply too big to effectively fit into the duration of a short-short or conventional short. For example, a murder is a single, clear dramatic action with one crisis, but it is unlikely that a four-, or even ten-minute, film could do proper story justice to the murder and its investigation. So, what does a dramatic action with one crisis look like, and how can it drive a story for the short narrative form?

Building on the work of Gurkis, we propose another way to consider the structure of the short film: what we call the four underlying principles of short film creation and construction. These four underlying principles are based on many years of reading, and viewing hundreds of successful short films, and scripts, and distilling the four key, underlying principles of their structure. One of the key benefits of these four principles is their universal application to any story type, genre, world, period setting, location, narrative, and/or time structure. These four principles, which are generalised, yet fundamental to working within the short film form, are:

- One location.
- One time-frame. In other words, the story takes place during one continuous period of time.
- A small cast of characters, all clearly emotionally and psychologically opposed to each other.
- One big problem that has imminent and dramatic consequences for at least one of the characters, and that the audience can quickly and easily comprehend.

To illustrate how these four principles function, we discuss and analyse four examples of award-winning short films that fit the short-short and conventional short categories. But, first, let us further elaborate on each of these principles.

The Four Underlying Principles of Short Film Creation and Construction

One location can include interior and exterior, but still only one location. This is critical as it concentrates resources and avoids wasting production time moving locations. It also creates a pressure in which the characters and story unfold.

One time-frame does not necessarily mean the film must be in real time, although many are; rather, it should not be set over two days, several days or weeks. One continuous time-frame also allows for time to be disjointed: such as time travel, non-linear storytelling, or overlapping time so that the story can be told from multiple points-of-view.

Having **a small cast of characters, all clearly emotionally and psychologically opposed to each-other**, is critical as it automatically injects drama. Emotionally and psychologically opposed characters generally have different reactions to any given situation, and sometimes those reactions can be very strong, thus creating conflict – which in turn creates drama. It is important to encourage students to consciously fashion characters that are clearly emotionally and psychologically opposed at the very start of conceptualising their film, because in our experience, this is not how many students begin designing their characters; hence, stories that fail to connect, with characters that often appear to be quite similar.

Creating **one big problem that has imminent and dramatic consequences for at least one of the characters** is something that most student can readily do. However, in our experience, designing that problem in such a way that an audience can quickly and easily comprehend what the problem is, and understand all its ramifications, appears to be more challenging. Generally, this is due to the filmmaker being so close to their story that to them, the one big problem is obvious. In reality, to an audience who has never seen the film before, that one big problem is obscured by the action and the activities of the characters. Being able to place the one big problem at the epicentre of the story, and make it easily and quickly identifiable to an audience, is more difficult than it first appears. Furthermore, because short films are short there is little time to build up to revealing the one big problem. It needs to be revealed as quickly as possible.

We now turn to examples of these principles in action, in a range of multi-award-winning short films. These films were not chosen simply because they have won many awards. Although this was a consideration, more importantly, these films have been screened at many festivals, which indicates that they have easily achieved one of the key objectives of making a short film: being selected for a short film festival, or better still, a major short film festival, like the Berlinale Shorts section of the Berlin International Film Festival, or the Short Films Competition and the Cinéfondation Selection of the Cannes Film Festival.

1. ***SINCERIDAD*** (2014), by writer/director Andrea Casaseca, fits into Gurkis' short-short category at just over two minutes long, excluding end credits. This satirical comedy takes place in an apartment dining-room (one location) during lunch. The dining table is set with lunch dishes and left-over food. The first shot we see is a two-shot of the parents asking their son (who is off-screen) what is going on. There is a cut to a very nervous looking son (a small cast of three) about to reveal something he is very freighted of revealing. The son hesitantly tells his parents that he has a job (one big problem). His mother is extremely distraught, while his father tries to keep everyone calm (emotionally and psychologically opposed characters). How can their son, who did not even finish high school, have a job when both parents have been unemployed for a long time; his sister, who has two universities degrees, is unemployed; and all of their friends and relatives are also unemployed? The story, which unravels in real-time (one time-frame) concludes with the son revealing he has been given a job as a politician – which is the comedic punchline to the film.

2. ***EXIT LOG*** (2014), by writer Chris Cornwell and director Gary Freeman, is based on an original outline script by Academy Award-winning writer Geoffrey Fletcher, and is six minutes long excluding end credits, thus fitting between Gurkis' short-short and conventional short category. It is a time-travel sci-fi film set in 2249 and takes place in one compartment of a spaceship (one location) as it travels deep in space. The film begins with an exterior shot of the spaceship travelling through space, as lower screen titles inform the audience that time-travel has been invented, but is limited to just three minutes. When the time-drive is activated everything on the ship is reset, except any notes left in the exit log. As the music swells there is a large explosion on the left-hand-side of the spaceship (one big problem). We cut into a compartment, and the first thing we see is that the time-drive has been activated and is counting down to zero. A computer-stylised voice is also counting down. Next, we see two of the spaceship's engineers (a small cast of two) struggling to deal with the consequences of

the explosion. As the countdown voice reaches zero, the soundtrack and music build to a crescendo and an explosion sound transport us back in time three minutes (one time-frame). This all happens by the 1:26 minute mark of the film. Now we see the two engineers playing cards. One is willing to risk busting out by drawing another card in the hope of winning, while the other states that the probably of drawing a winning card are 3 in 427. Thus, the card game quickly establishes that the cast are clearly emotionally and psychologically opposed. The remainder of the film explores how these two characters deal with the one big problem, which is quickly and easily understood by the audience. Just before the film ends, the audience realises we are back to those same few seconds just before the time-drive was activated, and that the spaceship and crew are trapped in this endless time-loop (one time-frame).

3. At just over nine-minutes, *GRANDMA'S NOT A TOASTER* (2013), written by Academy Award-winning writer Shawn Christensen and directed by Andrew Napier, fits neatly into Gurkis' conventional short film category. The film takes place one stormy night (one time-frame) in the entrance, living room and veranda of a two-story house (one location). The opening camera shot is from the elder brother's point-of-view of his sister, who wants him to replace their aged and dying grandmother's will with a forgery. The film implies that the sister will inherit nothing from the original will (one big problem), but the forgery leaves the majority of their grandmother's assets, worth $78,000, to the sister. The elder brother is extremely sceptical and reluctant to do as she suggests. All the time the grandmother is in the living room, wheelchair bound and on a drip.

At the 1:50-minute mark, storm and thunder sound effects are accompanied by loud music and a whip-pan to the front door. The film then cuts back in time 25-seconds, and we see the same action play out, but this time we see the elder brother as the camera is now from the sister's point-of-view. When this section of the film catches up narratively to where we cut away, the front door bursts open and the younger brother runs in, partly wet by the rain. The younger brother reveals that he plans to get married to a stripper he sometimes loves, and in order to impress her rich father he wants to take their grandmother's engagement ring. The film has thus established a small cast of four emotionally and psychologically opposed characters.

At the 4:49-minute mark, the grandmother starts shooting a handgun while the storm and thunder effects and loud music occur again. This time the film jumps back one-minute and we cut to the brother's point-of-view. This section of the film continues until the 6:23-

minute mark, when this time only the music swells, and we cut to the grandmother's point-of-view as she wakes up from her sleep. The film then jumps back to the 1:42-minute mark, and using the device of the grandmother falling in and out of slumber, the film is able to complete unravelling the story by the 9:15-minute mark (one time-frame).

4. Running at just over nine-minutes excluding end credits, *8* (2010), written and directed by Aćim Vasić, tells the story of two soldiers (a small cast) from opposing armies in an unknown war, who try to outwit each other after one of them crashes his fighterplane and the other takes him prisoner (one big problem). The two soldiers are identified by the letters on their helmets: one has an X, the other an O. Soldier X is rough and gruff, while solider O, the fighterpilot, is delicate and gentile (emotionally and psychologically opposed). As the soldiers are clearly from opposing armies, no dialogue is used. While soldier O untangles himself from his parachute, soldier X takes him prisoner and marches him through a snow-covered forest (one location) as more snow continues to fall. When soldier X is distracted by an unseen fighterplane battle in the sky just above them, soldier O tries to escape, but is shot and wounded, and recaptured by soldier X who then stands on a landmine. Again, soldier O tries to escape, but is shot and wounded a second time by soldier X. As the story unfolds, their attempts to outwit each other lead them to a deadly stalemate – all the while, a snow owl looks on. The film is told in real-time (one time-frame).

Conclusion

Building on the work of Bal, Cooper and Dancyger, Cowgill and Gurkis, in this chapter we have shown that although the short film shares many of the visible, surface elements of the feature film, such as characters, story, locations, cinematography, editing, production design, soundtrack and musical score, at its core a short film is far more different to a feature film than it is similar. While many screenwriting and filmmaking authors can articulate what a short film is not, few are able to clearly describe what a short film is, in ways that are helpful to student filmmakers. Our analogy of the motorcycle and the car is a useful tool in drawing attention to how a short film is different to a feature film, without discarding their visible similarities. While our four underlying principles of short films are so universal, that they are an effective starting point for students to begin crafting a short film from the conception of their story idea, rather than falling into the unconscious trap of developing a screenplay with an idea that is better suited to a feature film. We hope that the analogy, the four underlying

principles, and the case studies will help educators to better approach the short film form in the classroom or studio, and students to create more compelling short films.

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