The Seconds Pile Up

by Adrian Martin

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One of my favorite short films is Jean Rouch's Gare du Nord, part of a well-known nouvelle vague compilation of the early 1960s, Paris vu par ... (1964). Rouch's contribution appears to be one continuous shot or long take running for around fifteen minutes, although it is in fact two shots joined with a cleverly disguised cut. In it, a man and woman argue. They start indoors in a high-rise apartment. The camera follows them into an elevator going way, way down - and then out into the streets. The exchange gradually becomes more tense, frantic and violent. The scene spills into the streets of Paris around a large train station (the Gare du Nord), and hurtles along. The live, direct sound recording strikes the viewer as forcefully and palpably as the long take technique. Finally, these two people reach a bridge, and encounter a disturbed stranger. One of these three, in despair and frustration, jumps off. The camera concludes its movement by tipping over the edge of the bridge to see a crumpled body below.

This is an extraordinarily tense and compelling film. So much of the vital, radical, bodily and energetic cinema that follows it in cinema history (Cassavetes, Pialat, Ferrara, Clark) seems prefigured by it. Its sense of the headlong unravelling of a relationship, in condensed, unreal 'real time', is amazing. I regard it as a perfect film, a perfect jewel, in the way that its form and content fit together and reinforce each other absolutely. At the time of its release, Jean-Luc Godard, who also had an episode in Paris vu par ..., had admiring things to say about Rouch's achievement: "Seconds reinforce seconds; when they really pile up, they begin to be impressive". (1)

Short films we call them, rather ignominiously, or just shorts, to add insult to injury. As John Flaus once wisely quipped, we don't call feature films 'longs', do we? What must we think of such films, to define them purely in terms of their running time - as if their precarious existence in the world depended only on whether we can jam them into a tiny slot somewhere, between the cracks of the bigger movies?

It's the most obvious fact of global film culture: for most people, including myself most of the time, 'film' means 'feature length narrative film'. This is evident whenever awards are given out, or polls are taken of the best and brightest. The film world is, of course, riddled with every imaginable kind of cultural apartheid, and the casual bias against shorts is just one of its reigning problems. But it's a special shame that short films suffer from such exclusion today, when there seems to be more of them around than ever - more opportunities to make and also to show them. Think not only of the various Festivals and showcases devoted to shorts (especially animations), but also the wave of adventurous anthology films (from Icebreaker [1988] to A History of Found Footage [1997]) and the many TV concept-slots like the Picture House series that commissioned films from the likes of Atom Egoyan, Raul Ruiz and Ann Turner. Even Paris vu par ... inspired a sequel, with the added subtitle Vingt ans apres (twenty years later, i.e. 1984), in which I discovered two more of my favourite films under twenty five minutes: Philippe Garrel's Rue Fontaine and Chantal Akerman's J'ai faim, j'ai froid.
We have all heard, until our ears start bleeding, the usual pieties, clichés and assumptions about the short film arena. That it's a training ground or a launching pad, the place where all the great directors started off. Or a free space where young things can get all those wacky impulses out of their systems and start learning a bit of solid craft at the same time. Oh, and let's not forget: the short film as calling card, as entrée into that magnificent thing we call a film industry. I'm not saying that these attitudes are actually untrue, or that they are never the case for certain filmmakers. But in all these rather smug and condescending characterisations short film is strait-jacketed as the carefree, childhood playground that filmmakers leave behind, in order to grow up and join the big boys and girls in the feature film world.

To pick apart these givens, you can start almost anywhere. Take experimental cinema, for instance, rather than narrative filmmaking. One can easily think of classic directors, such as Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, Robert Breer or Kenneth Anger, who have never done anything but 'shorts' for their entire careers. Ditto for animated cinema. Even within more industrialised and commercial worlds of filmmaking, the assumption that shorts necessarily lead to longs - and that there is no road back - is simply wrong. No longer can it absolutely be said that, once filmmakers have embarked on their first feature, they will never make another short. Directors such as Godard, Akerman, Wim Wenders, Lars von Trier, Agnès Varda, Nanni Moretti and Jim Jarmusch make shorts of many kinds (from experimental pieces and TV commissions to music clips and ongoing 'cumulative' collages) all the time, in between and all around their feature productions.

When Ruiz likes a film (by himself or others) he usually says: "It's strong". That's like Godard's comment on Gare du Nord, when he described it as "impressive". Strength and impressiveness, it seems to me, provide two keys to unlocking the aesthetics of the short film - an underdeveloped and underdiscussed area, if there ever was one. The artistic challenges of this area are very special and particular. Short films are most pleasing when there is a fit between form and concept, between idea and substance. This is true of all cinema, but in the short film is an especially condensed, crystalline form. There are no seconds to waste. And yet, to grab spectators, to hold them and make them feel like they have journeyed through a well-formed, block of time, space, incident and emotion in a persuasive and satisfying way - that is no easy task. I believe that the short film quite naturally belongs to an aesthetic realm of astonishment, shock, strength and impression. But I don't mean that all short films have to be violent or spectacularly pyrotechnical in their style. On the contrary, a limpid, understated vignette can be just as strong and striking.

I can think immediately of at least two dangers that tempt filmmakers in this arena of astonishment. One is a temptation towards overkill, an excess of what I think of as ornamentation: every angle, sound effect, acting gesture cranked up to the max in a frenetic, blazing, five minute montage. I suspect that the real challenge of the short film is to know when not to throw in another cut, another image, another optical or aural trick; when to trust a certain understatement or minimalism. Another temptation for the short filmmaker is towards simply trying to do too much, cover too much ground, cram in too many levels. I am thinking of those short films (and there are many) which feel like fifty or ninety minute features squeezed tight into fifteen minutes, with just far too many time periods and grand themes, too many character arcs and flashbacks, too many slow fades to black and grand sweeping crane shots over the rooftops of suburbia. I have often wondered whether our major film schools really try to guide their students through the special problems and possibilities of the short form. Films that feel like mini-features - satisfying neither in themselves nor as synopses of a grander dream - can only arise from 'calling card' fever.
Problems of an artistic and aesthetic order are not the only kind bedevilling short filmmakers. Short film culture in Australia - such as it is, ad hoc and profuse, democratic and factional - can cause despair even to the most fervent devotees of the form. There's the problem of 'mixed bag' programming, for instance - a seemingly inescapable evil at an event such as the St. Kilda Film Festival - which crams anything up to twenty films into a session, almost regardless of their individual tone, topic or texture. There's the closely related problem of anonymity: reading the weekly television guides, who in the viewing audience ever has a clue what's coming up on SBS' Eat Carpet? There are all the traps - which programmers and curators of all stripes struggle with and against all the time - in 'framing', packaging, presenting and publicising short work: it is so easy to appear patronising about it, as some TV presenters and newspaper journalists have amply demonstrated. And then there are the troublesome trends, like the word from Cannes scouts in the mid-'90s: 'fifteen minutes is far too long, we want these films under five minutes tops!' - this was the era, you'll remember, when one-minute films were the big award winners.

There was a bad sign a few years back when the National Film and Sound Archive polled many players in the local film scene to establish which would be the 'Top One Hundred Australian Films' deserving honour and preservation. In the published results, the first short films appear at number 142 - Jane Campion's Passionless Moments (1984) and Tracey Moffatt's Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy (1990) - well below an interminable list of often dreary, conventional features. But what would Australian cinema be for true cinephiles without The Illustrated Auschwitz (Jackie Farkas, 1992) or Thread of Voice (Arf Arf, 1993), Waterfall (Arthur & Corinne Cantrill, 1984) or Violence in the Cinema... Part 1 (George Miller, 1972)?...

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This text is an updated adaptation of Adrian Martin's contribution to the 1997 St Kilda Film Festival forum on "The Future of the Short Film".

Endnotes: