

1. A SHORT HISTORY

SHORT AND SILENT

Once upon a time, all film was short... and silent. The earliest films were little, one- or two-minute 'actualities' that showed single shots of everyday scenes such as trains arriving in stations, workers leaving factories, street scenes and so on. These moving images fascinated early audiences but the novelty soon wore off. Audiences wanted more, so filmmakers began to produce longer pieces showing popular vaudeville acts, slapstick-comedy routines, dancing girls, exotic locations and even short narrative stories such as Georges Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and Edwin S Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903).

With the rapid development in film stock, camera and projection equipment and basic film grammar in both Europe and America, filmmaking became more ambitious. Films now began to tell longer, more complex stories. However, as this was the Silent Era, the visuals had to do all the work – there was no dialogue. Early screenwriters – who were known as scenario writers – began to emerge, typically from theatrical backgrounds. Their job was to create short narrative stories – scenarios – that could be told using simple visual images. They drew heavily on plays and novels for inspiration. The need to communicate also led to the exaggerated gestures, facial expressions

and theatricality of the actors that became so characteristic of this era. Slapstick comedy was particularly popular because of its highly visual style.

By 1910, it's estimated that there were over 10,000 Nickelodeons in the USA alone. One- and two-reel films of 10 to 20 minutes' duration were the most common type of product screened by them. At that time the standard reel of black-and-white film stock was 900 to 1,000 feet long and ran for between 10 and 12 minutes of screen time.

THE BIRTH OF THE FEATURE... AND 'SHORT' FILM

More ambitious film directors like DW Griffith soon realised they could tell longer stories simply by adding more reels. 'Multi-reelers', as they were initially called, appeared as early as 1906 with the world's first officially recorded feature film being John Tait's Australian-made *The True Story of the Kelly Gang*. Others followed in the USA, Britain, Italy, France, Germany, Denmark and Eastern Europe, with some, like Italy's 1914 historical spectacular *Cabiria*, being up to twelve reels long. However, one- and two-reelers remained the norm.

It wasn't until 1915 that a feature film appeared that changed the filmmaking landscape forever. DW Griffith's highly controversial three-hour Ku Klux Klan epic *The Birth of a Nation* brought together all that was then known of filmmaking and storytelling technique and blew audiences away. It was a sensation in spite of its blatant racism and made a fortune at the box office. It took filmmaking to a whole new level. Suddenly, audiences and producers alike wanted to see and make long films that told more complex, sophisticated and emotionally involving stories. The studios began to churn them out by the hundred with many being tailor-made vehicles for the rising stars of the new Hollywood star system.

One- and two-reelers continued to remain immensely popular but they were now relegated to the role of support act to the main attraction or main 'feature' as it was known. They came to be known

SHORT FILMS

as 'short films' or 'short subjects' as opposed to the longer 'feature films', and so the term 'short film' was born. The most popular shorts were slapstick comedies by the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and the Keystone Cops, westerns and serials such as *The Perils Of Pauline* and newsreels such as *Pathé News* and *Movietone*.

A PACKAGE DEAL

Going to the 'Moving Picture Palace' was a big deal at that time, a social event, and theatre owners soon realised that, as well as the ticket prices, they could make as much, if not more, on the confections, drinks, popcorn, or whatever else they sold the audiences. The longer they could keep the audience captive in the theatre, the more they were likely to spend and consume. Hence, a shorts programme would accompany every feature with each film separated by an intermission – ostensibly to allow the projectionist to change reels but also to allow the patrons time to buy refreshments. Singers and stage musicians often accompanied these shorts packages as well. Shorts filled a useful commercial niche and were used to warm up audiences and fill theatre time. Some of the most popular even grew to half an hour in length or were serialised, e.g. Laurel & Hardy in the 'thirties.

The studios found that making shorts was a useful way to maximise the use of their expensive real estate, filmmaking resources and contract employees. Everyone was on fixed contracts and pay in those days, and shorts kept them busy when they weren't making features. The studios used their control of the theatre chains and block booking to ensure that everything they made was exhibited commercially. Animated shorts – or cartoons, as they came to be known – became very popular in the late 1920s. Walt Disney built a whole studio system around them. The studios recognised that making shorts was a useful way to train and test their production staff, upcoming actors and directors. Some independent production companies specialised

in making shorts, which they later sold or rented to the studios and movie-theatre chains.

THE RISE OF THE 'B' MOVIE

By the early 1930s, the standard movie programme included live performers, a newsreel, a short or serial, a cartoon and a feature film. However, following the introduction of sound in 1927 and the appearance of colour film, this began to change as the B movie appeared. The B movie was a long film that supported the main feature but was not quite as long and generally not of the same standard. It's suggested that the name came from the studios referring to their short-film production units as 'B units' – facilities that they turned over en masse to making these low-budget support features.

B movies appeared in rapidly increasing numbers throughout the 1930s and 1940s and sounded the death knell for commercially produced studio shorts. Despite the appearance of musical shorts from 1927 to 1933, the studios soon stopped making shorts altogether to concentrate all their resources on making features. Live performers and shorts gradually disappeared, as 'double bills' became the norm. Newsreels were retained as a public service and were of particular importance during the war years but they couldn't compete with the arrival of television news in the 1950s.

With the death of the studio system in the early 1950s, the end of block booking and the rise of television across the developed world, shorts all but disappeared. It was cheaper for owners of movie theatres or cinemas – as they became known outside North America – to programme a 'double bill'. The short format was now more suited to television where the half-hour slot became a standard programming unit. Half-hour episodes of favourite programmes, soap operas, cartoons, serials and comedy shows like *The Lucy Show* punctuated by adverts became the norm. Soon, the most common type of short film to be found globally was the television commercial.

ARTHOUSE AND ENTHUSIASTIC AMATEURS

For a time after the war, independently produced shorts were only made by enthusiastic or wealthy amateurs in film clubs, the few film schools then in existence, or by organisations such as the information units of Government Departments. There were few outlets for exhibiting them outside the arthouse circuit. Film festivals were still few in number and tended to focus on celebrity directors, feature films and stars. Studios no longer needed shorts to train and test their employees – they could do that making B movies. Those who entered broadcasting found that the networks had their own programming requirements and restrictions, with little room for independently minded short filmmakers who wanted to do their own thing.

Furthermore, without the help of production companies and studios, making a short film was not an easy thing to do. Film stock and equipment were neither cheap nor plentiful and processing and editing a film was expensive. In the 'fifties and 'sixties portable 16mm cameras designed for newsgathering during World War Two did become available together with lightweight Super 8mm cartridge-loaded cameras designed for the amateur home-movie market. After World War Two many second-hand 16mm cameras found their way into the hands of aspiring directors and short filmmakers in Europe and America. The French New Wave and Italian Neo-Realists made use of them. Independently made shorts were produced in small numbers but the quality was sometimes poor due to the filmmaker's lack of resources and experience.

FILM SCHOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY

In the 1960s a number of significant film schools such as those at NYU, CalArts, Columbia and UCLA were founded in the USA. Short filmmaking became a standard training and graduation vehicle. Graduates, including such famous names as Scorsese, Lucas and

Coppola, made short films to showcase their talent. Since then there has been a steady increase in the number of film schools established around the world. The pace accelerated dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the technological revolution in high-quality, low-cost camera technology.

First, in the 1980s, lightweight video cameras appeared that recorded analog video direct to tape. This was followed in the mid 1990s by more sophisticated digital camcorders recording high-quality video digitally on tape with Mini-DV being the most popular format. Hard discs, DVDs, mini discs and, more recently, solid-state memory cards have replaced tape as the storage media of choice. This ability to film on a low budget was complemented by the ability to edit on a home computer or laptop using editing software such as Final Cut Pro.

This revolution in filmmaking technology and the dramatic reduction in cost, together with the ever-increasing availability of equipment, brought about a renaissance in short filmmaking. Short films are being made on everything from mobile phones to sophisticated prosumer cameras. With almost every family having a camcorder for home movies, the public are much more camera literate. The level of interest in filmmaking has increased exponentially and brought with it an explosion in short filmmaking.

Most countries now have universities with dedicated film departments. Specialist film schools and centres have sprung up in many major cities. Public funding alone accounts for more than 1,000 short films per annum in Europe, not counting those produced in film schools. The UKFC estimated in October 2009 that 2,000 short films had been produced the previous year in the UK with 1,800 through the various film schools and departments of higher education, 150 through public funding and a further 50 privately funded by independent filmmakers. Furthermore, this doesn't count the vast quantity of user-generated content uploaded to sites like YouTube.

FESTIVALS AND THE INTERNET

Hand in hand with this explosion of interest in filmmaking there's been an upsurge in the number of film festivals established worldwide offering outlets for short film. Online submission manager, Withoutabox, now lists over 3,000 festivals worldwide with around 1,000 of these hosting short-film programmes, competitions and awards. Some, like Clermont-Ferrand or Tampere, specialise entirely in short film... and then there is the Internet.

The arrival of the Internet presented short filmmakers with a screening outlet unlike any other in history. Films can be uploaded to sites such as YouTube and made instantly available to a global audience. Short films can be viewed on everything from Internet cable channels to personal, specialist or organisational websites, social-networking sites, mobile phones and pay-per-view or video-on-demand sites. Individual short films even have their own websites and Facebook pages charting their progress from pre-production to winning awards. The Internet, electronic-communications media and the proliferation of film festivals have given short filmmakers opportunities for exhibition and promotion unheard of since the early days of film, while the technological revolution has given them the means to realise their dreams, producing high-quality films on relatively low budgets.

But while short filmmaking has returned on a scale unseen since the early days of cinema, something is still missing. Despite the technology, training and opportunities, many films are still poor. As a member of the short-film selection panel at the Foyle Film Festival, I see far too many short films that fail because of bad acting, poor sound recording, lighting issues, but most of all because of an underdeveloped, poorly crafted or uninspiring story. Indeed, some lack a story altogether. All short films need to begin with a great idea and a well-written and carefully crafted screenplay. Too many short filmmakers skip this vital step in their rush to become directors.

Instead of finding a good writer and screenplay, many try to write it themselves with little or no screenwriting ability whatsoever. Short films need good writers and screenplays, but what's in it for the writer? Why should he or she write a short screenplay?