Story design in the short fiction film

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Shorts are to features what sonnets/
haiku are to novels.
Elliot Grove

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to propose a non-formulaic model that can be used as a set of guidelines when writing scripts for short fiction films.

Unlike sequential models, which focus on a series of steps a story is presumed to pass through as it unfolds, the present approach is based on the view that short film storytelling can best be described in terms of opposing properties that balance and complete one another in a dynamic interplay. An approach of this kind is not only more open than other narrative models, but also better suited to catching the most common beginner mistakes in designing short fiction films.

Seven forms of interplay or balance will be described here, some requiring a more ample presentation than others, but all equally important – and all proposed not as rules that must be followed but rather as opportunities for increasing the likelihood of effective storytelling.

Finally, just as short films are at their best when they follow the "less is more" principle, I will make the present discussion as concise and to the point as possible. Readers interested in a more extensive discussion, applied in some detail to concrete examples, are referred to my book, *The Art of the Short Fiction Film: A Shot-by-Shot Study of Nine Modern Classics* (McFarland, 2002).

1. CHARACTER-FOCUS ↔ CHARACTER-INTERACTION

Whose story is it?

The best short films generally make it clear from the start whose story they are telling. Once we as viewers know that, we have a "home-base" within the film, a means for keeping our bearings and for knowing how to gauge the relative importance of anything that happens.

Generally a short is *one* character's story. But it *can* be the story of two (or more) main characters, in which case the challenges are much greater and the chances of success correspondingly diminished. Beginners are therefore well advised to make their short films one character's story.

However this property, which we will call character-focus, takes on its full value within a short when it is balanced by character-interaction – by having the main character interact with other characters at key points in the story. This is what gives a short its vitality and a short lacking in interaction – a common beginner's mistake – will not easily capture and hold our interest.

The interaction which breathes life into a short does not have to be conflictual. There are excellent short films that are entirely free of conflict. And this important difference between the short film and longer narratives is often overlooked because of a widespread tendency to take it for granted that all cinematic storytelling is necessarily conflict-based.

This first form of balance, then, involves an interplay of character-focus (clarity as to whose story is being told) with character-interaction (having that character interact with other characters at important moments in the film). A short in which either is lacking can still be an excellent film – but despite rather than thanks to its management of the properties just described.

2. CAUSALITY ↔ CHOICE

Theoreticians such as Gerald Prince (1973) suggest that any story must include at least two events, one of which causes the other. And while it is true that causality must be a part of any good story, I believe that is only half the picture. Consider William Golding's account of an incident he experienced while serving in the Royal Navy during the Second World War:

> The Germans used to have a very long distance plane. And if we were escorting convoys back across the Atlantic, this plane would come out, and it would circle the convoy, perhaps five miles away from it, round and round and it was wirelessing to submarines saying where this convoy is. So you knew that this thing that was going round was sending your position.
>
> And I remember one moment at which the captain of the escort got in touch with the plane. He flashed it up on an Aldis lamp, you see – and said, "Please, will you go round the other way. You are making my head ache." And this airplane turned round and started going round the other way, like that, you see. There was this kind of insane contact between people.

It could be argued that causality is in play here, with the British captain's message as the cause and the reversal of the German pilot's flight direction as the effect. But what makes this an interesting story is that the German pilot *chose* to fly the other way, and for that matter, that the British captain *chose* to contact the pilot, violating wartime protocol which prohibits frivolous contact with the enemy.

Here we have characters making things happen, rather than characters things happen to. In other words, causality flows from the choices characters make and this is what drives the story forward, while at the same time making those characters more interesting in our eyes. As John Gardner wrote: "Failure to recognize that the central character must act, not simply be acted upon, is the single most common mistake in the fiction of beginners."

And what is true of Golding's story and Gardner's observation applies in spades to the short film, where the only characters likely to earn our interest are those who make choices and thereby shape their own story.

The bottom line then with respect to the properties discussed in this section is that an interplay of causality and choice in a short is preferable to storytelling in which causality overrides or precludes choice rather than flowing from it, and in which the main character is too passive or helpless to take charge of his or her own story.

3. CONSISTENCY ↔ SURPRISE

In the best short films, it is usually in a matter of seconds that the characters are presented and defined for the viewer, and once defined, they remain consistent with their initial definition. At the end of the film, they may have learned or experienced something meaningful but they are still the same people they were at the start; only their situation has changed. And this is another important difference between the short film and longer narratives.

In the feature film, generally spanning considerable stretches of time, the main character is expected to undergo some fundamental change in the course of the story. In the short, in which story-time and screen-time often coincide – so that a film with a running time of seven minutes generally depicts an event lasting the same seven minutes, characters remain consistent from beginning to end. Unfortunately, student filmmakers writing short film scripts are sometimes told to bring their central character through some basic transformation by teachers who fail to distinguish between the kinds of storytelling appropriate to short and feature films.

In the short film, then, characters remain essentially the same throughout.

But that doesn't mean that the viewer should ever be able to guess what will happen next. And paradoxical as this may sound, characters can continue to exhibit exactly the same attributes from start to finish and yet behave in a totally unforeseeable manner.

Striving for this kind of interplay of consistency and surprise is well worth the effort when designing the characters and story for a short fiction film.

4. SOUND ↔ IMAGE

That the visual possibilities of the film medium should be exploited to the fullest is something that beginners rarely forget when designing their short film stories. But that the action might be as interesting for the ear as for the eye is often overlooked.

In those short films which make the most of the storytelling possibilities inherent in sound, characters produce sounds or are responsive to sounds. In these films, sound is not merely an auditory backdrop for the action, but rather at key moments in each story, actually *becomes* the action.

In this way, an interplay of sound and image is a way of taking full advantage of specific storytelling opportunities inherent in a given situation.

5. CHARACTER ↔ OBJECT

In one way or another, it is essential for any short film to bring the viewer inside the thoughts or feelings of its characters, and preferably without the use of voice-over or inner monologue, which rarely results in a successful film.

Allowing the dramatic context to suggest what must be happening within a character while the camera dwells on the

character's face, is one of the most effective strategies for bringing us inside a character's mind. As Gabriel Byrne has aptly stated:

> Essentially I believe by some mysterious alchemy which we really don't understand, the camera photographs thought. I think it photographs emotion and that it photographs thought. And if you're thinking it, the camera will pick it up. And I don't think directors understand that enough. They're always cutting away at crucial moments and you think "Oh God, stay with *the actor*! *He'll* tell the story."

And one particularly interesting way to heighten our experience of a character's subjectivity is to evoke those thoughts and feelings through the character's relation to some physical object (such as a pocket watch or a banister) that is charged with meaning for him or her.

Such an interplay of character and object helps to establish at one and the same time both the inner life of a character and some privileged focus in the physical setting, and this convergence of inner and outer, of subject and object, is perfectly suited to the short film since so much substance can thereby be carried in a single meaningful moment.

6. SIMPLICITY ↔ DEPTH

> *The one thing I try to do in all my books is to leave enough room in the prose for the reader to inhabit it... There's a way in which a writer can do too much, overwhelming the reader with so many details that he no longer has any air to breathe.*
>
> Paul Auster

A short film that tells a simple story is more likely to be experienced as an inviting space for the viewer to enter and linger in than a short film filled with clever twists from start to finish. Paradoxically, simplicity enhances depth in short film storytelling, by making the film a "habitable space" within which the viewer can explore and construct possible meanings.

Correspondingly, a short film that confuses or overwhelms the viewer with too complex a plot or too many details, is likely to hold the viewer at a distance. As editor and sound designer Walter Murch (1995) stated: "Past a certain point, the more effort you put into wealth of detail, the more you encourage the audience to become spectators rather than participants." This applies even more to the short film than to longer narratives.

Furthermore, too complex a plot in a short film can draw attention away from the characters, while a simpler plot can give the viewer the time and space needed to enter into the lives of the characters.

It is by keeping the story simple and resisting the temptations of cleverness that a sense of depth can be achieved in a short film.

7. ECONOMY ↔ WHOLENESS

If in making a short, the filmmaker chooses to follow the "less is more" principle by cutting to the bone and ruthlessly killing every darling, this concern with economy in storytelling will serve the film – strengthening it by keeping it lean and concentrated.

Beginners sometimes think that the longer their short is, the closer it comes to being a "real" film. Hence the temptation to stretch it out and make it fill as many minutes of screen-time as possible. When this happens, what might have been a good six or seven minute short often becomes instead an excruciating twenty-minute ordeal for the viewer, as anyone who has served on juries at international short film festivals has probably experienced.

Although in general, cutting should be tight, with shots kept as trim as possible, the camera should also be allowed to dwell unhurriedly on a face at moments when something important is going on within the character, and shots of this kind should be

allowed to run their course. Alternating in this way between tight cutting through much of the short and looser cutting when shots can bring us inside the mind of a character, also guards against too uniform a rhythm in the editing of a short.

But by and large, the "less is more" principle should be followed in weeding out everything that isn't necessary to move the story forward or to bond us to the characters.

At the same time, however, when a short film ends, the viewer should be left feeling not only that the film is complete but also that returning to it again and again would be rewarding. How is it possible to cut to the bone and still leave the viewer feeling that there is abundance in the film?

Part of the answer concerns the ways in which closure is managed. If for example the film ends by returning to its point of departure, only with some element changed as a marker that something irreversible has occurred, that can help the viewer to feel that the story has come full circle and is complete.

Another important closural strategy involves placing, just before the film ends, a symbolic gesture or event – perhaps the most significant moment in the film. That way, when the credits appear on screen, the viewer can be left with something meaningful to replay in his or her mind, and if that happens, there is a good chance that the film will be thought of as whole and inexhaustible.

Conclusion

There is no consensus as to the maximum running time for a film to be considered a short. Festivals differ widely in their criteria, ranging from a maximum length of 15 minutes at Cannes to 60 minutes at Uppsala. And the same variations can be found in the literature on the short film.

One of the problems involved in defining the short is that an intermediate form is often overlooked. The French use the term *moyen métrage* to describe a form lying between the short and feature film. And in Scandinavia, that in-between form of fiction film is usually called a *novellefilm* (that is, the equivalent of a short story). Typically 25 or 40 minutes long, films of this kind are really miniature feature films, though scaled down to simpler plots, fewer characters, etc.

The true short film on the other hand – the poetry of filmmaking – is typically only six or seven minutes long, and in my view has a maximum length of 15 minutes.

Beginners making their first short films should be encouraged to aim for a running time of six or seven minutes, if at all possible. That would increase the chances of producing a film that has the kind of density and concentration found in poetry, and in this connection I would like to quote a Chinese master, Wu Qiao, who wrote:

> The [writer's] message is like rice. When you write in prose, you cook the rice. When you write poetry, you turn rice into rice wine.

The mediocre short – dilute and tediously belaboring a story that seems to go on forever – is like cooked rice, while the best short films – holding back while teeming with substance – are pure rice wine.

SCHEMATIC OVERVIEW

1. character-focus ↔ character-interaction
letting the viewer know whose story is being told, yet keeping the main character interacting with others; unless we know whose story it is, we have no “home base” within the film; at the same time, interaction can provide the vitality needed to capture and hold our interest

2. causality ↔ choice
making cause and effect relationships central to the story, but having the causality flow from the main character's deliberate choices; main characters who make things happen, driving the story forward, are more interesting to the viewer than are characters things happen to.

3. consistency ↔ surprise
keeping behavior consistent with each character’s definition, yet utterly unpredictable; unlike longer narratives, the short fiction film is not good at depicting A character’s transformation; while the situation at the end of the film differs from that at the start, the characters remain essentially the same

4. image ↔ sound
designing the action in such a way that it is as interesting to the ear as to the eye; sound, in particular, should be an integral part of the action rather than simply an auditory backdrop for the action; characters can produce sounds and react to sounds; sounds can trigger events or can in themselves constitute events

5. character ↔ object and décor
having characters interact with meaningful objects and with their physical setting; in this way the inner lives of characters can be connected to the physical world; subjectivity and interiority are balanced by external, material things

6. simplicity ↔ depth
keeping the story simple enough to be habitable by the viewer; stories that are too complex or detailed hold the viewer at a distance, in the role of an observer rather than a participant; simplicity can best enable the viewer to enter the story and to explore and construct its meanings from within

7. economy ↔ wholeness
balancing the trimming away of all superfluous moments and detail so that the film is a concentrated distillation, with the viewer’s need to experience the film as a whole that is richly textured and teeming with life; only dwelling on characters’ faces (eyes) takes precedence over cutting to the bone; closural strategies can play a major role in leaving the view feeling that the film is complete and inexhaustible.

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