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Short Form Media

Content

Introduction: Short Form Media

Cynthia Felando

As a short film enthusiast and scholar, I have often said (by way of Rodney Dangerfield) that "short films get no respect." Although it may still be the case that short films get *less* respect than their feature-length counterparts, the picture is becoming much brighter. Indeed, it is an enormously exciting time for short film cinephiles as shorts are more readily available and popular than ever before; however, for film and media scholars the territory has been largely unexplored and our field has maintained an enduring bias in favor of the feature-length film. Nevertheless, shorts not only vastly outnumber features, they inform a richer understanding both of film history and our current shorts-saturated landscape. And the good news is that we are in the midst of a noteworthy expansion in terms of the critical and scholarly attention to the form, and short film and media is now an important and worthy new area of research.

It is a distinct pleasure to be the guest editor for this special edition of *The Projector* devoted to short form media. Our aims herein are to convey the flexibility of the category, to expand our understanding of its diversity, and to demonstrate productive and systematic methods of research, teaching, and analysis. In addition to the three articles and one interview in this issue, we are including two shorts along with artists' statements that further demonstrate the riches of the form.

The articles in this issue make significant contributions to the field by providing new ways to consider short form storytelling and visual strategies, and they add analytical depth to the study of individual shorts and filmmakers, both commercial and non-commercial. The articles also demonstrate the many rewards involved in the exploration of shorts, not the least of which is the continuation of recent efforts to rethink film and media scholarship by examining non-canonical forms and texts.

The first article, "Three Storytelling Strategies for Live-Action TV Spots," by the highly regarded short film scholar and filmmaker Richard Raskin, delineates the relationship between narrative and promotional purposes in terms of how, and if, a commercial brand is explicitly integrated into a spot's story. Raskin also considers two key storytelling strategies that enable

what he refers to as "a dynamic interplay of polarity and process." The first strategy involves "playing opposites off against one another," and the second conveys process whereby one thing turns into another. Two award-winning TV spots are used as detailed case studies and they include helpful shot-by-shot breakdowns. And, besides being well chosen for demonstration purposes, the spots are quite entertaining too.

Laurel Westrup's article, "The Long and the Short of Music Video," proposes a useful new category for shorts: the music video/short film. Using Michael Jackson's music video *Thriller* (Landis, 1983) as a case study, Westrup interrogates and complicates the distinction between the short film and music video, addresses the "discursive battleground" that accompanied *Thriller*'s release, and offers a framework for considering the intersection of the two forms. Beautifully written, the article also expands Westrup's attention to such "hybrid texts" by offering a survey of film festivals and online platforms that enable further consideration of the relationship between artistically and promotionally motivated films and videos.

My article, "Teaching Short Films: Strategies, Possibilities, and Resources," provides an account of some of the specific methods, subject areas, and short film categories that I use in the undergraduate short film and media course I've taught for the last five years. It also offers some tips regarding the usefulness of a few research and film resources, including short film festivals and shorts reference books. The aim is to provide a map, of sorts, that might be helpful to others who are planning or refining their own courses.

Sarah Hanssen's fascinating interview with the award-winning short filmmaker Jennifer Reeder provides many insights into her creative process and interest in telling unconventional and provocative stories about girls in their teen years. Reeder discusses her brilliant short, *A Million Miles Away* (2014), which one reviewer aptly likened to "John Hughes on a prom date with David Lynch."

As noted above, two shorts are featured in our special forum section. Sarah Hanssen does double duty in this issue as a writer and filmmaker. Her short, *How to Make a Baby* (2016), uses a common short filmmaking strategy--the parody, in this case of sex education films--to cleverly and deftly go beyond the usual attention to the meeting of sperm and egg in order to explore the complications of family, romance, birth control, and procreation as they *really* are. The second film, *In the Dreams of Others* (2014), from the multi-disciplinary art group S/N, is an ethereal and altogether mesmerizing short in which fragments of time, space, and character are conveyed in exquisitely crafted and edited shots that play out in four individual quadrants and work to provide a "reflection of space on identity."

We hope that this special issue will enable and inspire further exploration and appreciation of shorts as a rich and endlessly fascinating form that is both resilient and, especially in the context of online streaming, nearly omnipresent.

Three Storytelling Strategies for Live-Action TV Spots

Richard Raskin

In the present essay, I will describe three storytelling strategies that have not been mentioned in the published material on TV spots, with the exception of an earlier piece of my own in which one of those strategies was discussed (Raskin 2005).

This is an effort to fill a gap in the extensive and highly varied web resources and printed literature on advertising. Useful as they may be in other respects, models of the AIDA, DAGMAR, Hierarchy of Effects or REAN type as discussed for example in Karlsson (2007), deal with what an ad should be able to accomplish but not with the management of storytelling challenges within a fictional narrative. The same applies to websites and YouTube clips brimming with advice on how to make successful commercials (Graff 2012, Wiseman 2014, Frozen Fire 2016) or on branding (Holt 2016, John Williams 2016) as well as to the tips on writing from such luminaries as David Ogilvy himself, "the father of advertising" and original Mad Man (1985) and master copywriter Adrian Holmes (2014), to books on the greatest ads (such as Robinson 2000 and Twitchell 2000), and to monographs on various aspects of advertising or branding (Zygman 1996, Ries and Trout 2001, Messaris 2004).

In addition to being of some interest for student filmmakers producing their own commercials or PSAs, this article may also be useful in an analytical perspective, for studying properties of ads that have already been produced.

In a reference section called TV Spots Cited at the end of this essay, the reader will find links to all the spots discussed here, as well as credits and other data.

I. Positioning the Brand within the Narrative

An immensely popular TV spot known as *German Coast Guard* (Osborn and Maroni 2006) was produced in Norway to promote the Berlitz language schools. This 40-second ad still attracts considerable and well-deserved attention on the web, ten years later.

In this commercial, an emergency call comes in as a new recruit is seated at a Coast Guard radio transmitter: "Mayday, mayday. Hello, can you hear us? Can you hear us? Over. We are sinking. We are sinking." In response, the inexperienced young man speaks slowly and in a thick German accent into the microphone, saying: "Hello. This is the German Coast Guard." The voice on the radio then repeats even more desperately: "We are sinking! We're sinking!" The young recruit then asks: "What are you sinking about?" after which a sudden burst of Beethoven's *Freude Schöner Götterfunken* accompanies an end-title now urging: "Improve your English," followed by an end- title bearing the Berlitz logo and the words "Language for life."

German Coast Guard

I often begin my own courses on the production of TV spots by showing this beautifully crafted ad and asking for a volunteer to retell the narrative. Invariably, the retelling of the story includes no mention of Berlitz. The point I try to make in this connection is that while the ad provides immense narrative pleasure, it is far from certain that the promotional purpose of the spot is fully served by the narrative, or that a significant percentage of viewers will even register that it is in fact a Berlitz ad.

One way to ensure that the narrative optimally serves its promotional purpose is to position the brand within the storytelling, thereby making it impossible to remember or retell the story without mentioning the brand it is designed to promote.

Tracks (Snyder 1997), made for Audi, is an excellent example of an ad that makes the brand an integral part of the narrative. This spot begins with a grandfather and grandchild walking in a snow-covered wilderness. The grandfather spots a paw print in the snow and pointing it out to his grandson, says "Amarug" as a subtitle translates the word to "Wolf." They walk on and soon pointing out a larger paw print in the snow, the grandfather says "Nanuk" ("Bear"). Again they move on and arrive at tire tracks in the snow. The grandfather, picks up some of the snow from a tire track, narrows his eyes while studying the cold white flakes between his fingers, then turns to his grandson and says, "Audi… Quattro," after which the boy solemnly nods and the Audi logo and end-title appear on screen.

Tracks

Here, as I wrote in an earlier piece, "the brand is positioned within the story in an optimal manner, in that much of the narrative pleasure afforded to the viewer springs from the very utterance of the product's name, and it would be impossible to recount the narrative without mentioning the brand and model." (Raskin 2005:117)

Much of this also applies to the Fedex Superbowl commercial in 2003, playing off a scene from the film, *Cast Away* (Robert Zemeckis 2000). In this ad known as *Castaway Courier* (Buckley 2003) which went viral, a still bearded, shaggy-haired man delivers a weather-beaten Fedex package to the address on the label, and says to the woman who answers the door: "Hi… I

was marooned on an island for five years with this package and I swore that I would deliver it to you because I work for FedEx." The woman accepts the package and says "That's very admirable. Thank you." Then as she turns to enter her home, the FedEx man says: "Hey, by the way, what's in the package," to which she cheerfully replies while holding up most of the contents as she mentions them: "Oh, nothing really. Just a satellite phone, GPS rotator, fishing rod, water purifier and some seeds. Just silly stuff." And as he realizes what he had access to while stranded on the desert island, she adds: "Thank you again. You keep up the good work."

FedEx *Castaway Courier*

The principle illustrated by *Tracks* and *Castaway Courier* is worth keeping in mind: that instead of using the narrative merely to dramatize the need for or to highlight the assets of the brand to be promoted, but reserving all mention of the brand itself for the end-titles, it can be useful to make the brand so central a part of the narrative that remembering or retelling the story would be impossible without naming the product the ad was designed to promote.

II. An Interplay of Polarity and Process

For a narrative that may last as little as 30 seconds to have enough structure for the viewer to grasp its logic quickly and exactly as intended, it can be useful to place a basic polarity at its center, playing opposites off against one another. But this is only half the picture since telling a story rather than simply evoking a situation requires that there also be process – one thing turning into another, before the viewer's eyes or ears. Therefore, managing a dynamic interplay of polarity and process can be an excellent goal to strive for when designing the narrative for a TV spot.

Two award-winning commercials, each presented here with a shot-by-shot breakdown in order to give the reader a full outline of its narrative, will now help to illustrate this important strategy. A PSA will also be drawn upon, but without a shot-by-shot breakdown since it involves no fictional narrative.

The Water in Majorca (**Paul Weiland 1985): A shot-by-shot breakdown**

Images and dialogue are reproduced here with the kind permission of the Paul Weiland Film Company and with the help of copywriter Adrian Holmes.

Shot 1
On office door: School of
Street Credibility

Shot 2
Pupil (in posh voice): The
water in Mallorca doesn't
taste like what it ought to.

Shot 2b
Ron (in cockney voice):
No, no. The wa'er…

Shot 3
Ron (off): …in Madj-or-
ca…

Shot 4
Ron: …don't taste like
wot it oughtta.

Shot 5
Pupil (posh voice): The
water in Mallorca doesn't
taste quite like it should?

Shot 6
Ron: Madj-or-ca!

Shot 7
Pupil: Mallorca?

Shot 8
Ron: Madj-or-ca!!

Shot 9
Pupil: Mallorca.

Shot 10
Ron (to someone off-
screen). Oy, Del. Any
danger of some
refreshment in here?

Shot 11

Shot 12
Del. Here y'are. Get your laughing gear around there.

Shot 13
Pupil. Oh, golly.

Shot 14

Shot 15a

Shot 15b
Pupil (in cockney voice) The wa'er…

Shot 16
Pupil (off). …in Madj-or-ca…
Ron. What's that?

Shot 17
Pupil. (cockney) …don't taste like wot it oughtta. (Posh again.) Oh, gosh.

Shot 18

Shot 19
Pupil (stronger cockney): The wa'er in Madj-or-ca don't taste like wot it oughtta. (Sniffs.)

Shot 20a
Ron: She's cracked it. She's only cracked it.

Shot 20b
Del (in posh voice): Yah, absolutely Ron.

Shot 20c

Shot 21
Speak: Heineken
refreshes the parts wot
other beers cannot reach.

Shot 22a

Shot 22b
*NB. Shot 22, in which the pupil crudely wipes her mouth
with the back of her hand, is only in the director's cut
which was never broadcast. I am indebted to Adrian
Holmes for this and other important information
concerning this commercial.*

This commercial, now considered a classic, plays off and reverses the elocution process depicted in *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor 1964). In the Cukor film, the cockney-speaking Liza Doolittle played by Audrey Hepburn, is given lessons in articulating proper English by Professor Henry Higgins, played by Rex Harrison. In the words of the commercial's copywriter Adrian Holmes,

> The whole commercial of course is a reverse parody of this movie - and you
> might be interested to learn that originally 'The Rain in Spain' was going to be
> the phrase we were going to use in our script (which I co-wrote with my creative
> partner, Alan Waldie).
> To our dismay, we discovered at the last minute that this was a copyrighted song
> lyric that we didn't have the rights to.
> End of idea, we thought. But then our creative director Alfredo Marcantonio said
> 'why don't you simply paraphrase it?'
> So 'Rain' became 'Water' and 'Spain' turned into 'Majorca' - and that of course
> ended up improving the idea hugely. (Holmes, "Email" n.p.)

The main polarity in this commercial is of course the opposition of posh versus cockney. And the process triggered by a swig of Heineken's beer is the pupil's transition from posh- to cockney-speaking in Shots 15-19; and in the director's cut, an extra physical gesture in Shot 22, when she crudely wipes her now crooked mouth with the back of her hand, puts a finishing touch on her transformation from what the Brits call Sloane Ranger to working-class Londoner. On the other hand, the assistant Del's swig of Heineken's turns his street-smart manner suddenly posh to Ron's dismay (Shot 20b and 20c), once again playfully confirming the product's transformative power and adding a new layer to the process, now flowing in both directions.

The dynamic interplay of polarity and process is one of the properties of this commercial that makes its storytelling so successful.

Low Rider (Brandon Dickerson 2001): A shot-by-shot breakdown

These images are reproduced with the kind permission of Lauren Schwartz at Kaboom Productions, John Butler at the ad agency Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners, and Don Derheim at the San Francisco Jazz Organization.

Shot 1
Jazz is playing on a car radio and will be heard until Shot 6.

Shot 2
Three men in the car are smiling and relaxed.

Shot 3
Man in front passenger seat: Jo, pedestrian.

Shot 4
The pedestrian is college type standing at a corner.

Shot 5
The three men in the car look at him.

Shot 6
The driver changes the station, putting on gangsta music that will continue until Shot 14.

Shot 7a

Shot 7b
The three men now change their body language, slouching and assuming a somewhat threatening demeanor.

Shot 8
The pedestrian notices the car pulling up at the corner where he is standing.

Shot 9
The three men glare at the pedestrian.

Shot 10a
He looks at the three men…

Shot 10b
…then turns to look at the light.

Shot 11
The traffic light changes from red to green, seen from the pedestrian's point of view.

Shot 12a
With the light now green, the car pulls away, with the three men still glaring at the pedestrian.

Shot 12b

Shot 13
The man in the back seat turns to look toward the intersection just left behind and says: Clear.

Shot 14
The driver now changes the station back to jazz which will be heard throughout the rest of the ad.

Shot 15
The three men once again assume their laid back, relaxed positions in the car.

End-title a
It's that time of year.

End-title b
*San Francisco Jazz Festival.
Starting October 25th*

In this commercial, which won the Gold Lion Award at the Cannes International Advertising Festival in 2001, there are a number of polarities in play. But the ones that count the most because of their connection to process in the ad, concern: a) the music played on the car radio, alternating between jazz and gangsta; b) whether the men in the car are seen or unseen by others; and c) the attitude and body language assumed by the three men in the car. Taking all of these elements into account, we can describe the polarities and process in this ad as follows:

	Shots 1-5	Shots 7-13	Shot 15
Music played	jazz	gangsta	jazz
Observer in range	none	pedestrian	none
Attitude and body language of the men in the car	laid back and smiling	intimidating, glaring	laid back and smiling

These multilayered polarities and accompanying forms of process help to make the storytelling in this ad particularly satisfying.

As a final note, I will mention that there are two ways of understanding the motivation of the men in the car. According to one interpretation, they simply *enjoy* scaring the pedestrian, taking on their threatening pose and switching over to their aggressive music for that purpose. Seen in another light, they would *have* to change their music and attitude in order to live up to their image when observed by someone within range. This openness to two related but distinguishable interpretations further enriches the narrative.

Evolution **(Yael Staav and Tim Piper 2006)**

A third illustration of polarity and process is much simpler to describe than the two preceding ones, in that no fictional narrative is involved. In this TV spot commissioned by Dove and which won the Cyber Grand Prix Lion Award at the Cannes International Advertising Festival in 2007, a rather plain looking woman is seated at a brightly illuminated place for hair and make-up artists to work on her, and her appearance is gradually transformed – also with the aid of successive alterations produced in Photoshop by an expert – into one of glamorous perfection. Her final, fabricated image is seen on a billboard, and is followed by end-titles that begin with the statement: "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted."

Two frames from the Dove *Evolution* ad

The woman before the transformative process has begun.

The billboard showing the final product of make-up, hair styling and Photoshop expertise.

Here the polarity might be described as real versus artificial, or natural versus cosmetic, or plain versus glamorous, and the process is the transformation of the one to the other before our eyes.

III. Subtext

Some TV spots tell their stories in such a way that the viewer is given dots to connect in order to make sense of the narrative. This effort is rewarded with an "aha" experience that can be both powerful and enormously gratifying for the viewer who has formulated in his or her own inner thoughts an essential cause-and-effect relationship within the story. The following PSA, which won the Bronze Lion at the Cannes Lion International Festival of Creativity (formerly the International Advertising Festival) in 2015 is an excellent example of an ad that leaves subtext for the viewer to work out.

The Man and the Dog (**Rodrigo Garcia Saiz 2015**)**: A shot-by-shot breakdown**
Images reproduced here with the kind permission of Beto Cocito, Executive Creative Director.
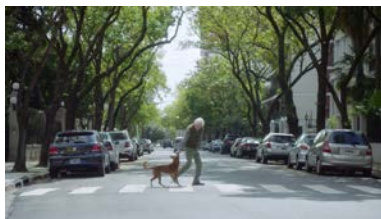
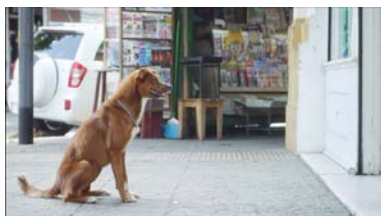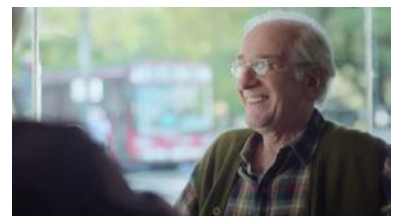

Shot 1

Shot 2

Shot 3

Shot 4

Shot 5

Shot 6

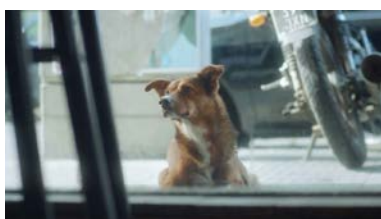

Shot 7

Shot 8

Shot 9

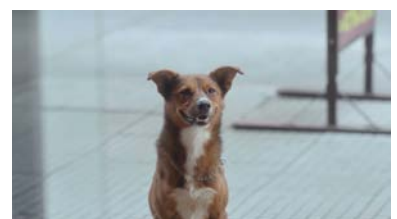

Shot 10

Shot 11

Shot 12
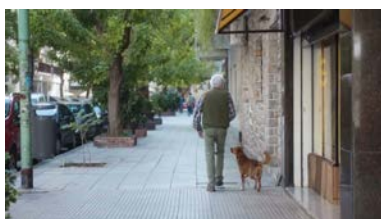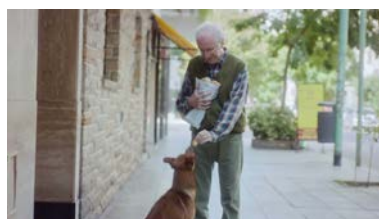

Shot 13

Shot 14

Shot 15

Shot 16

Shot 17

Shot 18

Shot 19

Shot 20

Shot 21

Shot 22

Shot 23

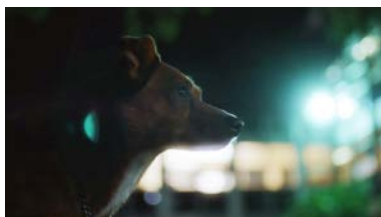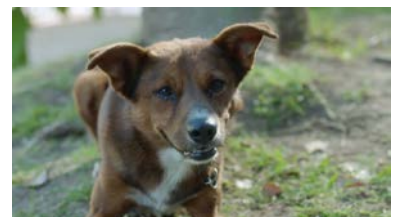Shot 24

Shot 25

Shot 26

Shot 27

Shot 28

Shot 29

Shot 30

Shot 31

Shot 32

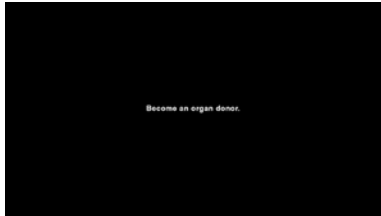Shot 33

Shot 34

Shot 35

Shot 36a

Shot 36b

Shot 37

Shot 38

Shot 39
"Become an organ donor."

Shot 40

Shot 41
"Fundacion Argentina de Trasplante Hepatico"

The ad establishes wordlessly in Shots 1 to 17 that there is loving bond between the man and his dog, and in shots 18 to 32 that when the man falls ill, the dog loyally follows the ambulance to the hospital where it waits just outside, day and night and even in the rain, in the hope of some renewed contact with its master. Up to this point, no particular effort is required on the viewer's part to understand exactly what is happening at every moment or to admire repeatedly the dog's boundless devotion.

The viewer's relation to the story changes with Shot 33 when a new character is introduced into the story – a woman who is being discharged from the hospital. We see the edge of a bandage just barely visible above her blouse, suggesting that she may have just had a heart operation. The dog's reaction to her starting with Shot 34, when it suddenly lifts its head, is likely to puzzle us at first, and for those final seconds of the narrative, when the dog bonds with the woman to her amused delight, sniffing her and placing its paws on her legs (Shots 36 to 38), the causality in play is left in subtext for us to wonder about.

As a small experiment, I shared this ad on Facebook on the afternoon of March 20, 2016, asking people who were willing to watch it to let me know whether they fully understood the story before or after reading the end-title. As of now, the following afternoon, seventy-eight people have replied; twenty-five (or about 32%) of the respondents said it was *before* and fifty-three (or about 68%) said it was *after* the end-title appeared that they caught on. I am well aware that if I had the time and resources I might have carried out this experiment in a far more rigorous manner, but I believe that this informal Facebook exercise – though not done by the book – nevertheless provides some valuable empirical data.

On that basis, I would suggest that for roughly one third of the people watching this ad, the live-action narrative itself is sufficient for working out the causality left in subtext, in which case the end-title merely confirms what the viewer has already formulated in his or her thoughts; while for approximately two thirds of the audience, the "aha" experience is triggered by the end-title. But even then, there is subtext to work out: that the dog is recovering his lost master in the woman as a result of her now bearing one of his organs. What I am suggesting is that both groups of viewers have dots to connect either with or without the help of the end-title, and that the use of subtext in this ad greatly enriches our experience, regardless of when we fully understand the story it has to tell.

IV. Conclusion

The three storytelling strategies proposed above – (1) positioning the brand within the narrative, (2) enacting an interplay of polarity and process, and (3) leaving causal links in subtext for the viewer to work out – should be regarded as opportunities for enriching the live-action narratives of TV spots, rather than as rules. They might be considered a supplement to models and paradigms that focus on the goals to be achieved by ads, without offering insights into storytelling strategies for best achieving those goals when fictional narratives are used.

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The Long and the Short of Music Video

Image Credit: http://stonerdays.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Thriller-Jackson-monsters.jpg

Laurel Westrup

The hybridized term "music video/short film" is becoming increasingly common online, suggesting a growing affinity between two media forms that have often been seen as distinct.[1] But this term doesn't necessarily suggest that all music videos are short films. Typically, it seems that the longer a music video is, the more likely it will be considered a short film. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (John Landis, 1983) is a good example. At fourteen minutes, the film is long by music video standards, but, like other short films, it is shorter than a feature-length film. Length alone is not the determining factor in whether or not a music video is considered a short film, though. Rather, a longer running time might signal other properties that are generally not associated with music videos and that are associated with cinema: *Thriller* demonstrates a sustained interest in narrative, includes non-song sound, and was released theatrically. Despite these cinematic qualities, commentators at the time hesitated to call *Thriller* a short film in part because its primary function was still promotional: to sell Michael Jackson's album. In this essay, I suggest that rather than defining *Thriller* as either a music video or a short film, we should instead read *Thriller* as a historically significant example of the music video/short film. My case study of *Thriller* complicates the distinction between short film and music video, and provides a framework for approaching the intersection of these two forms more broadly. I conclude the essay with a brief survey of contemporary film festivals and websites that are continuing to redefine this relationship.

Historically, short films and music videos have shared the dubious distinction of being relegated to the fringes of mainstream film culture. In *Discovering Short Films*, Cynthia Felando traces the lower status of short films back to the rise of "feature" films in the early 1910s, which were perceived to have more artistic and economic merit than shorts. As she points out, "industry discourses increasingly touted longer-duration, higher budget films as unique, as individualized products – unlike the one-reel and two-reel films that were considered interchangeable parts of a

standardized program" (*Discovering* 21). The notion that short films' duration renders them less complex has followed the form doggedly in the decades since the advent of the feature film.

In part because of this perceived lack of complexity, short films have often been seen as training exercises rather than bona fide works of their own. As Felando notes, "today the live-action fiction short is generally characterized as a transitional form – as a useful practice medium for students or aspiring filmmakers, a way to demonstrate a filmmaker's readiness to move into feature-length filmmaking" (*Discovering* 6). This phenomenon makes sense financially, since short films tend to be much less expensive to make than feature films, and therefore entail fewer risks to producers, but this discourse presumes that short films are not full-fledged, mature works of art. There are institutional factors that bolster the association between short films and film education. The short thesis film has become an important feature of university film programs from the 1950s on. Even though some of these films, such as George Lucas's *Electronic Labyrinth THX 1138 4EB*, have been celebrated as successful works in their own right (Felando, *Discovering* 33-36), they're still framed within the film industry as calling cards for directors looking to move up through the ranks. While this perception is reductive, it has nevertheless been the dominant narrative about short films.

Short films have also been marginalized historically as a result of distribution and exhibition patterns that favor feature-length films. Short films held a prominent place during the transition to sound, when Hollywood required shorts to fill the elaborate film programs then in vogue. However, as Hollywood moved toward a double feature system of exhibition during the Depression, shorts played a less substantial role in the packages the studios distributed to their theater chains (the infamous block booking strategy that would contribute to the dissolution of the studio system in the 1940s), and studios prioritized even shorter shorts – one-reel as opposed to two-reel films (Felando, *Discovering* 31). Eventually, the Hollywood studios dissolved their short film departments and short films largely disappeared from mainstream theatrical exhibition by the late 1950s. These developments forced short films into other, mostly non-theatrical domains such as the classroom and television. While short films are again finding widespread audiences via the web, many decades spent in the shadows of feature exhibition have rendered the history of short film largely invisible. Recent work by Felando and other scholars interested in non-theatrical distribution have begun to make this history visible,[2] but there is still a great deal of work to be done in this area.

Music videos are one such domain that has received relatively scant academic attention, especially in the scholarship on short films. If short films have been relegated as a lesser form within critical and industrial discourses, music videos have arguably faced more substantial prejudice. In a 2009 interview with David Fincher for the British Film Institute, Mark Salisbury begins a segue into Fincher's early career by stating that the director "started to make pop videos, just when pop videos were being taken seriously." Fincher immediately interrupts, asking, "Were pop videos ever taken seriously?" (148). The question is telling coming from one of music video's most celebrated auteurs. Music videos' perceived lack of "seriousness" (code for aesthetic merit) can be traced to some of the same factors that have marginalized short films. Music videos' short duration presumably correlates with skimpy development, especially where narrative is concerned. Music video narrative conventions frequently overlap with those of short film. Felando suggests that short film narratives are "often elliptical and tend to favor the focus on moments or 'fragments' of time" (*Discovering* 13). This description recalls Carol Vernallis's discussion of music video narratives, or "non-narratives" as she calls them, which evoke

narrative elements without necessarily telling a complete story. Rather than consider music videos as wholly narrative, Vernallis suggests that "the notion of a number of micronarratives interspersed across the video might be more helpful" (*Experiencing* 19). These narrative fragments may not add up to a coherent story, but they nonetheless "[engage] the viewer in a process of reconstructing, interpolating, or extrapolating a story behind the scenes that are actually visible" (*Experiencing* 20). This elliptical approach is apt for both short films and music videos, given their short duration, but it might also be perceived as a failure or shortcoming of both forms when they are compared to narrative feature films.

Like short films, music videos have frequently been framed as training exercises or calling cards for directors and other production personnel who are interested in breaking into feature film production. One need only survey the myriad lists of "best music video directors who became feature film directors" for evidence of this perception. Typical is this introductory blurb to "Ranked: Music Video Directors Turned Film Directors" by *Metacritic*'s Nick Hyman: "It begins with MTV. The music video channel's massive influence can hardly be measured. The alchemical combination of music and movies into irresistible three-minute chunks was legendary. Many of today's top filmmakers got their start during the Music Television renaissance, and their work makes up many of the films we see at the multiplex" (n.p.). While Hyman does suggest that music videos have cinematic components, the emphasis here is on music video as a launching pad. Fincher, who appears on Hyman's list, connects his entrée into music video making directly with film training at the most basic level:

> From third grade, I was making movies in 16mm, and every year in film class . . . they'd give you a song, a 45 and they'd say, 'Make a film to this song,' because there was no sync sound. So you'd go out and shoot stuff with your friends, and you'd cut it and it was made to that song. So when MTV came along, people went, 'We want you to make a film to this song,' and I thought, 'I actually know how to do that. That may actually be the only thing I do know how to do'" (qtd. in Salisbury 148).

Music video's rudimentary qualities could not be any clearer here: a music video is what you make when you don't have sync sound. It's a form so simple that even a third grader can master it. And, again, this is coming from someone who has been celebrated as one of the most aesthetically sophisticated music video directors of all time.

If music video is, like short film, denigrated as a training exercise lacking complexity, its low status is further compounded by the promotional function of the genre. Even Vernallis, who makes the most sustained case for music video as an art form to date in her landmark *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*, acknowledges that "the video must sell the song; it is therefore responsible to the song in the eyes of the artist and record company" (x). Early music videos, many of which were shot on film, were frequently referred to as "promotional films" or "pop promos," hence suggesting a closer affiliation with advertising than art. When I recently asked a reference librarian at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library whether I would find clippings files for music videos (the Academy keeps such files for all films exhibited theatrically in the United States), I was told that the library was unlikely to collect material on music videos since the Academy considered them to be commercials rather than films.[3] Music videos' commercial function – any visual and

narrative elements presumably must sell the featured song – exacerbates the limitations associated with its short form.

If short films have been marginalized in industrial practice, critical discourse, and media scholarship, these trends have been even more prevalent when it comes to music videos. As Felando notes, short films have gained legitimacy through the Academy Awards, which have included categories for short films since 1932, and film festivals; in 1954 the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen became the first film festival dedicated entirely to short films, and Cannes has awarded a Palme d'Or for short films since 1955 (*Discovering* 29, 38). But many of these avenues for exposure and legitimization have not been available to music videos. The Academy Awards does not have a category for music videos and implicitly discourages music videos from nomination for the short film categories. Some short film festivals and shorts competitions within larger festivals have begun to accept music videos, as I'll detail later in this essay, but others have not. The Palm Springs International ShortFest, which bills itself as "one of the largest showcases of short films in North America" does not accept music videos for their programs.[4] Even if short films don't have much cultural cachet, they have arguably won more recognition than music videos, and consequently, within a larger hierarchy of cultural and aesthetic value, short films are still generally placed above music videos. But given the similarities between the two forms that I've noted thus far, I want to complicate this distinction.

I have chosen *Thriller* as a key site to investigate here because it is not only a hybrid text that draws from conventions of music video and narrative film, but also because it has been an important discursive battleground on which distinctions between short film and music video have played out. Felando has remarked that "it is overwhelmingly the case that individual shorts are seldom discussed on their own terms and merit as aesthetic, entertainment, and historical objects" ("*Skaterdater*" 55). The case study that follows provides such an evaluation, but it also aims to open up a space in which to consider more recent negotiations of the terrain between short films and music videos.

Short Film or Long Music Video? *Thriller* **as Hybrid Text and Discursive Battleground**

In December 2009, less than a year after Michael Jackson's death, *Thriller* became the first music video admitted to the Library of Congress's National Film Registry. While the Library of Congress press release called *Thriller* "the most famous music video of all time," the press release also emphasized the video's filmic qualities, noting that a 35-mm print of the film had played theatrically. The Library of Congress was not alone in acknowledging *Thriller*'s dual status as music video and short film – in fact conversations and controversy about the film's status began even before it was released. My goal here isn't to settle this debate, but rather to show why it might be meaningful to see *Thriller* as a hybrid text both in terms of the formal qualities of the film itself and in terms of the discourse around it. Claims made for or against *Thriller* as a short film foreground questions about the status of music video and short film that continue to be relevant today.

Thriller begins with a spoof on a typical 1950s teen exploitation horror flick. A couple's car runs out of gas in the woods. A full moon appears from behind the clouds and the girl (Ola Ray) finds out just what her date (Michael Jackson) meant moments before when he confessed "I'm not like other guys." The King of Pop transforms into a horrible teen werecat with whiskers, fur, and

claws, and begins to chase his doting date through the woods. Then, just as were-Jackson has trapped his prey and is about to attack, we cut to a long shot of a 1980s movie theater, where the same two actors are on a movie date watching the film within the video. Ola Ray's 1980s character, scared, walks out of the movie, followed close behind by Jackson. From there, the song "Thriller" comes up on the soundtrack, and we follow Jackson as he walks Ray home, dancing around her and lip-syncing. As they pass a graveyard, Vincent Price's rap begins, summoning "grizzly ghouls from every tomb" to surround the couple. Price's rap concludes, the zombies close in, and a dramatic close-up reveals that Jackson is a zombie.

Following this narrative sequence is the centerpiece and most famous segment of the video, the zombie dance sequence. Jackson and his fellow zombies dance to an instrumental reprise of "Thriller" until finally, over 9 minutes into the video, Jackson turns around, sans zombie makeup, and sings three iterations of the chorus. Following the conclusion of the last chorus, the instrumental reprise continues and Jackson, again in zombie makeup, leads his ghoulish gang in an attack on Ray, who runs into an abandoned house.

The closing sequence of the video recalls the beginning. Just as the monster (in this case zombie Jackson) is closing in, a cut reveals a normal-looking Michael Jackson, in a normal-looking living room, touching Ola Ray's arm to wake her up; she's apparently fallen asleep on the couch, perhaps revealing both the fifties werecat film and the eighties zombie scene to be part of an elaborate dream. Jackson says, "Come on, I'll take you home," and Ray goes willingly, but in the final shot Jackson turns abruptly back toward the camera, revealing his cat eyes from the first sequence as Vincent Price's demonic laughter, which ends the "Thriller" album track, comes up on the soundtrack. There is a zoom into a freeze frame of Jackson's face as the credits begin to roll, beginning with John Landis's director's credit.

We could certainly read *Thriller* as an extended music video – a text that extends beyond the popular song at its core but that still promotes that song.[5] The key objectives of a music video are to highlight the performer(s), the lyrics, and the musical qualities of the song. *Thriller* does all of these things, particularly during the section where Jackson lip syncs the verses of the song as he dances around Ray. Throughout the sequence, Ray keeps the beat by walking at a continuous pace. This steady beat provides a foundation for Jackson's virtuosic physicality – without ever losing the beat, he's constantly in motion, dancing in front, to the sides, and behind Ray as she moves. The sequence foregrounds some of his signature dance moves. For instance, after "You're paralyzed," he bows forward and claps, then gives a little skip, and then shuffles forward as he gives his trademark "come on" gesture. Jackson's moves also help to illustrate the lyrics. As he lip syncs "You hear the door slam," he gives a sort of karate chop that accentuates the lyric "slam." During "You feel the cold hand" he moves toward Ray from behind her, with arms outstretched like a zombie, grasping her neck and softening on "hand." Throughout the sequence, Jackson playfully enacts many of the lyrics, emphasizing not only their horror-movie connotations, but also the subtext of "Thriller": the sexual thrill evident in lyrics like "'Cause I can thrill you more than any ghost would ever dare try." In the sequence with the verses, this subtext is most evident when Jackson joins Ray in a medium close-up during "cuddle close together/All through the night."[6] Throughout the sequence, Jackson's charismatic performance, featured frequently in close-up, bolsters his star quality, as we would expect from a music video.

The editing during the "Thriller" sequences of *Thriller* also follows music video conventions. During the instrumental intro to the zombie dance scene, the cutting frequently works to

emphasize the beat of the track and key dance moves. For instance, shortly before the chorus comes in, we get a sequence of four close up shots of four different zombies turning toward the camera to the beat of 1-2-3-4. Throughout the dance sequence, cuts often happen in the middle of a motion; for instance, the zombies' synchronized upper body shimmies, and the motion is continued in the next shot from a different angle, dynamizing Michael Peters's choreography and demonstrating an editing pattern seen frequently in music videos that feature dance numbers. While these cuts resemble matches on action, a convention of Hollywood continuity editing, their logic is musical rather than narrative in this case.

But *Thriller* also exceeds standard music video conventions, drawing cinematic elements into the mix. The opening three-and-a-half minutes demonstrate many conventions of typical Hollywood cinematography, editing, scoring, and sound mixing. The video begins with a high angle shot of the car driving through the woods – an establishing shot – and we hear on the soundtrack frogs and crickets, signaling a quiet wilderness setting. The camera moves down and toward the car, as we hear it sputter, and there's a cut to a medium shot of Jackson from behind Ray's shoulder. We cut to a close-up of Ray, looking worried, and then to a close-up of Jackson. "Honestly," he says, with a giggle, "We're out of gas!" There's a cut to a reverse shot of Ray, who asks seductively, "So . . . what are we gonna do now?" After Jackson's reaction shot, we cut to a tracking shot of the couple walking, their footsteps on the gravel audible over the lingering frog and cricket sounds. As they pause, we get another shot/reverse shot conversation between Ray and Jackson, this time culminating with Jackson asking "I was wondering if . . . you'd be my girl?" and Ray responding "Oh, Michael!" As Michael begins to tell Ray, "I'm not like other guys," Elmer Bernstein's score comes up on the soundtrack, initially subtle and quiet but creepy. The horror score becomes much more prominent during the cutaway to clouds passing in front of and revealing a full moon. As Jackson transforms into a werecat, the score becomes more intense, with terse strings marking the transition from Jackson's initial transformation, which is comprised mostly of extreme close-ups of Jackson's body punctuated by frequent shots of Ray screaming, followed by shots of Jackson chasing Ray through the woods. This sequence demonstrates not only classic horror conventions, but also classical Hollywood filmmaking style. The multilayered soundtrack, emphasis on dialogue, and continuity editing are all familiar movie features that are foreign to music video.

If we take *Thriller* as a whole, the most notable departure from standard music video aesthetics is the sound design. As Fincher's previously cited anecdote about his third grade film projects established, music videos are often presumed simple because they usually lack synchronized sound, or rather, the images are beholden only to a single soundtrack: the song. This is not the case in *Thriller*. Even in the sequences that feature the song "Thriller," diegetic sound effects frequently punctuate the song: we hear Ray's and Jackson's footsteps during the verses, and the sound of a concrete lid scraping the underlying crypt as a ghoul escapes his grave can be heard over Price's rap. The scoring and sound mixing are quite complex throughout the film. For instance, just prior to the zombie dance scene, Bernstein's score comes to a crescendo, then backs off for a beat (punctuated by a percussive hit), followed by a stinger that accompanies Jackson's zombie reveal. During this whole sequence, footsteps and zombie moaning are also present on the soundtrack. After the reveal, a sort of sucking sound accompanies a vertiginous dolly zoom of Ola Ray before the "Thriller" instrumental reprise comes up on the soundtrack. After the zombie dance, the "Thriller" reprise eventually cross-fades into Bernstein's score to accompany the final zombie-Ray showdown, all the while accompanied by diegetic sound. These elements of the text speak to its cinematic status.

Ultimately, though, *Thriller* is a hybrid text that seeks to meld cinematic and music video conventions so that the text will "work" in both registers. This is most evident in the use of the song "Thriller" in the film. While we hear the song throughout much of the video, we never actually hear the album track. We hear the opening of the song when Jackson and Ray come out of the theater, but from that point forward, the song is completely rearranged: the three verses are heard one after another, whereas they alternate with the chorus on the album track. In the film, Vincent Price's rap follows the verses, while it ends the album version of the song. After Price's rap, the film features an instrumental reprise that is not heard in the album version. From there, Jackson sings the first chorus, skips over the second chorus of the album version, and repeats the third chorus twice. The final line of the last chorus is truncated and replaced with a classic Jackson "ow!" as on the album version, but this punctuation carries extra weight in the film, where it brings the dance sequence to a definite close before the instrumental reprise takes over to accompany the zombies as they follow Ray into the abandoned house.

On the one hand, the re-arrangement of the song better matches the narrative flow of the film. By separating out the verses, the rap, and the choruses, Landis and Jackson were able to create three distinct scenes: Jackson and Ray's flirtatious walk to the verses, Price's rap that summons the ghouls, and the zombie dance sequence. But this narrative doesn't entirely come together. The zombie dance sequence has little narrative value, but it arguably has the most music video value, and that value is bolstered by the triple repetition of the chorus, the most exciting part of the song. We can see here the negotiation taking place between narrative demands (a chronological story where, walking home from the movies, Jackson and Ray are beset by zombies) and music video demands (an exciting dance sequence featuring a charismatic star performer). We could explain the zombie dance sequence as the kind of unnatural song-and-dance interruption characteristic of the classical Hollywood integrated musical, since the lyrics do comment on the ghoulish scenario that Jackson and Ray find themselves in. However, even though the chorus lyrics are still directed toward the singer's lover ("I can thrill you more"), Jackson no longer sings to Ray in this sequence. In fact, we don't see Ray at all during the dance sequence. She reappears when the narrative resumes following the dance. What is more, Jackson's zombie makeup disappears when he sings the choruses, signaling a shift from narrative character to music video performer.

There is a contradictory quality to *Thriller* when viewed and heard as a whole. Vernallis remarks on the uneasy coexistence of Bernstein's classic movie music with the pop "Thriller" music composed by Rod Temperton. She says:

> Rod Temperton's music . . . though it occurs in the song proper and seems better suited to Jackson's roles as escort and zombie . . . does not have as much authority as Bernstein's music, which has served so many films so well . . . Here, viewers may have difficulty   hierarchizing fantastical images with auctorial music, and pop music against real-life depictions (*Experiencing* 10).

The narrative film interrupts the music video and vice versa. Jason Mittell also speaks to this uneasy union when he calls *Thriller* "a generic exception, with fourteen minutes of narrative mixed with song and dance" (19-20). But regardless of whether *Thriller* is successful as a short film or music video, it pushes the boundaries of both forms by integrating components of each.

Thriller's production and exhibition history is as complex and hybrid as the text itself. According to Nancy Griffin's exhaustive account of the video for *Vanity Fair*, Jackson's record company initially had no interest in releasing a video for "Thriller." They had already funded, in whole or in part, the successful videos for "Billie Jean" and "Beat It," and even if they had wanted to fund a third video from the album *Thriller*, they wouldn't have chosen the title cut, which was largely considered a novelty song rather than a hit single. Jackson and his partners invented a wildly creative scheme to pair *Thriller* with a "making of" documentary to garner funding from some unlikely sources. As Griffin explains, "MTV agreed to pay $250,000 and Showtime $300,000 for the one-hour package; Jackson would cover some up-front production costs and be reimbursed. Then Vestron came in and offered to distribute *Making Michael Jackson's Thriller* as a $29.95 'sell-through' video on VHS and Betamax, a pioneering deal of its kind" (n.p.). This deal was pioneering not only for forging funding from private and multi-media entities for a music video, but also because it marks the first time that MTV explicitly helped fund a music video. As Gavin Edwards of *Rolling Stone* explains, MTV had a policy of "never paying for clips," but by contributing to the "making of" component of the *Thriller* package, "MTV reasoned that if they were paying for a movie, they were circumventing their own policy" (n.p.).[7] This complicated the text's status as music video or short film. As Tom Shales of *The Washington Post* reported shortly after the video's MTV premier, "MTV's perky 'veejays' always refer to 'Thriller' as 'a short film' because MTV fears other performers will get it into their heads that they, too, should be paid by MTV for their videos, now given virtually free to the system by record companies" (n.p.). Here MTV distinguishes between "music video" and "short film" for financial reasons, but as we'll see, these distinctions were mobilized by a variety of people around *Thriller* for a variety of reasons.

John Landis and Michael Jackson sought to present *Thriller* as a short film not for the sake of funding (according to Edwards, Landis called the making of the home video "The making of filler" [n.p.]), but for the sake of elevating the status of their production from the common music video. When they tell the story of how they came to make the film in *The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller*, Landis admits to his disdain for music videos, hedging this only slightly by acknowledging that Bob Giraldi's work on Jackson's *Beat It* video was "genuinely good." Landis and Jackson discuss their collective desire to make "something more elaborate [than a music video]." Landis continues that this "was what [Michael] wanted to do. His whole thing was 'it's gotta be good, it's gotta be great, it's gotta be big.'" Jackson interjects at this point, "the best," and Landis echoes him. Landis and Jackson were remarkably consistent in mobilizing this rhetoric. Griffin reports that even before *Thriller*, Jackson "judged the quality of what the fledgling rock network MTV was airing to be poor, and felt he could do better. He hired the best directors and choreographers and applied everything he had soaked up from watching Gene Kelly and Astaire movies." Jackson's cinematic aspirations for music video meshed well with Landis's ambitions, given that Landis was already a working feature film director who was not interested in entering the music video arena. According to Griffin, "Landis told Jackson that he would not direct 'Thriller' as a music video, proposing instead that they collaborate on a short narrative film that could be released in theaters – reviving that endangered species, the short subject – before it went to video" (n.p.). Significantly, Jackson and Landis shot on 35 mm, and Landis even drafted legendary makeup artist Rick Baker, with whom he had worked on *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) to do *Thriller*'s monster makeup. The result was, as Landis had hoped, a cinematic short worthy of theatrical exhibition.

The story of *Thriller*'s exhibition begins with these cinematic ambitions. The film premiered at a

star-studded event at the Crest Theatre in Los Angeles on November 14, 1983, where, after watching the video once, Eddie Murphy reportedly prompted a second screening when he screamed, "Show the goddamn thing again!" (Griffin n.p.). The film opened in the Avco Center Cinema in Los Angeles the next week, on November 24th, as part of a double-bill with Disney's *Fantasia*.[8] This theatrical run was especially essential to Landis's and Jackson's lofty goal of an Academy Award nomination, since Oscar qualification guidelines stipulate, "Films that, in any version, receive their first public exhibition or distribution in any manner other than as a theatrical motion picture release will not be eligible for Academy Awards in any category" ("Complete Rules"). *Thriller*'s theatrical run thus bolstered its cinematic ambitions.

But due to its funding arrangements, *Thriller* was also beholden to its less lofty television and home video partners. Following its theatrical run, *Thriller* premiered on MTV on December 2, 1983, after which it went into heavy rotation. According to MTV executive Les Garland, "We played [*Thriller*] three to five times a day. We were getting audience ratings 10 times the usual when we popped 'Thriller'" (qtd. in Griffin, n.p.). MTV wasn't the only outlet for the video. By the end of the month, on December 23rd, *Thriller* aired on NBC's *Friday Night Videos* (Shales n.p.). *The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller* – the whole package with the film and documentary – premiered on Showtime on December 15, 1983, followed by a premier on MTV on January 19, 1983 ("Landis' 'Thriller'"; "MTV To Preem").[9] The home video edition of the package shipped the day before the Showtime premier ("Landis' 'Thriller'"). The staggered releases and blanket exposure of *Thriller* were good for its many business partners, but were not as pleasing to Landis. He had hoped that *Thriller* would have an international theatrical run, but the promotional potential of the film-as-music-video took over. According to Landis, "Epic gave away the video free all over the world, to every television station that wanted it. There was a month when you couldn't turn the television on and not see 'Thriller'" (qtd. in Griffin, n.p.). Clearly, Landis felt that this compromised the integrity of the music-video-as-film.

In part because of its ubiquity, and certainly because of its cinematic airs, *Thriller* caused considerable consternation for some commentators. The problem of how to categorize *Thriller* was compounded by its bid for an Oscar nomination. In an article titled "Will 'Thriller' Thrill Academy?" *Los Angeles Times* entertainment reporter Michael London works through the positive and negative buzz around the video/film. London begins his piece by foregrounding *Thriller*'s massive success. He reminds readers that the nominees for Best Short Film are generally obscure and largely unseen, "But next year… there will be one contender that . . . millions have seen: 'Thriller,' a 13-minute extravaganza based on the title song from Michael Jackson's blockbuster album" (C9). Further emphasizing the threatening quality of Jackson's colossus, London asks, "Is 'Thriller' really a short film? Or a rock video? Its muddled status is expected to create an uproar at this year's short-film competition, traditionally a showcase for small-scale projects by aspiring film makers. For them, an influx of rock videos could be catastrophic" (C9). London's framing of *Thriller* is notable for the way it shifts the usual media hierarchy of value, where music videos are lowly promotional tools in comparison to aesthetically prized films, to frame music videos as the bullies on the media block. To support his assessment, he cites Bruce Davis, a special program administrator for the Academy, who says, "If this category gets crowded out by a lot of big-money music films, something would have to be done" (C9). Here the emphasis is on music video budgets, which at this point in time had surpassed the budgets for many of the short films with which *Thriller* would be competing.

What plays out in the duration of London's article is a debate over the merits of music video and

short film, respectively. These arguments track closely to the rationales for marginalizing music videos introduced earlier: music videos aren't fully developed stories, and they are promotional in nature. Oscar-nominated shorts director Paul Schneider remarked that he wasn't afraid of losing an Oscar to a music video because "The academy members are extremely conventional-minded. They're looking for stories that have emotional impact with a beginning, middle and end" (qtd. in London C10). Here Schneider makes clear that music video narratives will never be worthy competition for true narrative shorts. One of London's other interviewees, Oscar-nominated shorts director Carl Colpaertq, highlights music videos' promotional function as their chief shortcoming: "They have nothing to do with film making. It's just giving an extra dimension to music" (qtd. in London C9).

But not everyone London interviewed spoke negatively about music videos. London himself speaks to the job opportunities and possibilities for theatrical shorts exhibition that *Thriller* has publicized, and he quotes Oscar winner Shelley Levinson of the Academy's shorts selection committee as saying "Some of the most creative things are being done in that medium" (C9). As it turned out, London's interviewees needed not fret over *Thriller*'s Oscar bid. Despite its theatrical run, the film failed to qualify for nomination, apparently due to a failure to submit official screen credits as part of its paperwork ("Thriller").[10] Regardless of *Thriller*'s failure to become an Oscar nominee, the conversation around the film's bid demonstrates discursive negotiations that have followed the film from the 1980s onward.

Critical discourse around *Thriller* has wavered between calling the text a "music video" and a "short film" ever since its release. Shales demonstrates this in his 1983 article on *Thriller*: "[Michael Jackson's] new glorified music video well may be the most eagerly awaited and most talked-about short film ever made – at least since 'The Great Train Robbery' in 1903" (n.p.) The same year, *Hollywood Reporter* referred to *Thriller* as a "short film" ("Landis' 'Thriller'") and *Variety* went with "14 minute film" ("MTV To Preem"). In 1984 *Variety* described it as a "music video" ("'Making of Thriller'"), but in the context of the article the author might have made this decision because he or she is describing the home video release. In this same article, though, the author reports that in the United Kingdom, the release of the home video "has been accorded treatment similar to that of a major feature release and even made feature copy in the *London Times* and *Financial Times*." In 2009, the Library of Congress moved fluidly between calling *Thriller* a music video and noting its "lavish" 35-mm release. Reuters' article on the Film Registry news picked up this ambiguity, calling *Thriller* a "short movie" and, later, "the first music video" to be included on the Registry ("Jackson 'Thriller'"). Writing in 2013, Edwards fluctuates between calling *Thriller* a "video" and a "mini-movie." *Thriller* has thus been viewed and heard, not to mention celebrated, as both a short film and a music video throughout its existence.

This case study has not demonstrated a stable, coherent category called "music video/short film," and in fact it has shown some of the stakes involved in keeping these two categories separate. However, the case of *Thriller* also demonstrates a blurring of formal and discursive boundaries between short films and long music videos that is productive for considering these two forms alongside one another in historical and contemporary contexts.

The Legacy of *Thriller* for the Music Video/Short Film

On the one hand, Jackson and Landis's desire to distinguish *Thriller* from the average music video seems to reify the idea that music video ranks lower than short film in the media hierarchy. But to hear Jackson describe his mission, what he actually sought to do was to use his musical films to elevate both forms. In *The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller*, he remarks, "Well, we're trying to bring back the motion picture shorts, and I wanted *Thriller* and *Beat It* to be a stimulant for people to make better videos or short films." While *Thriller* might not have done a great deal to reinvigorate theatrical exhibition of short films, it undoubtedly opened new avenues to music video as an art equal to and perhaps worthy of the name "short film." Shales, writing shortly after the video's release, argues that even if *Thriller* is a bit disappointing as a film, it "has lifted music videos into a new realm of adventurism and respectability" (n.p.). By way of conclusion, I want to survey a few sites where adventurous music video/short films have taken root more recently: film festivals and online platforms.

Film festivals have been an important site for short film exhibition since the 1950s, and more recently some short film festivals and festivals with short film categories have begun to open their programs to music videos, especially those that, like *Thriller*, push the boundaries of the form. Probably the best known of these is the South by Southwest Music, Film, and Interactive Festival in Austin, Texas (SXSW). As part of their shorts competition, SXSW includes a jury award-eligible category for music videos. Music videos seem a natural fit for an event that began as a music festival, but festivals' recognition of the affinity between the two forms seems to be growing. The fledgling Apex Short Film and Music Video Festival in Rochester, Minnesota, which began in 2015, is a good example. While the festival does include a separate category for music video, the scrolling feature on their website showcases entries from all categories seamlessly intertwined, thus emphasizing the similarities rather than the differences between these media forms.

The Apex Festival, while explicitly hybrid, is also indicative of a growing number of festivals dedicated to music videos all over the world. The Sprockets International Music Video Festival in Athens, Georgia, which started in 2004, claims to be "the longest running film festival exclusively for music videos in the world" ("Sprockets").[11] Their stated mission, which is similar to the mission statements of many other music video festivals, is to "[highlight] an art form which is rarely seen on the 'big screen' and is often overlooked on the traditional festival circuit" ("Sprockets"). In an interesting reversal from earlier logics, some music video festivals use language that would seem to distinguish music videos from short films, with the implication that short films cannot be music videos. The one-day Portland Music Video Festival states in their "Frequently Asked Questions" that while submissions may include dialogue and "non-music sound," that "it should be clear that it's a music video. The song should be featured prominently. We are not interested in musical short films, with extensive dialogue or traditional instrumental scores." Music video submissions to the nascent Render Festival in Vancouver, Canada must be under 10 minutes in length, presumably also to ferret out short films posing as music videos ("Submissions"). But this is not always the case. Both the Berlin Music Video Awards and the Los Angeles Music Video Festival take a more expansive approach to music videos, with several categories, including one for "narrative" music videos. Not all of the videos that screen as part of the narrative competition at these festivals are extended music videos like *Thriller*, but many similarly push the boundaries of music video and short film.

A particularly hybrid example of a music video/short film that screened at the Los Angeles Music Video Festival was the 2015 winner in the narrative category, Benjamin Booker's 8:30 minute *The Future is Slow Coming*, directed by James Lees. Like *Thriller*, *The Future is Slow*

Coming opens with a title: "Benjamin Booker in *The Future is Slow Coming*." The first part of the video tells an elliptical, non-linear story about police brutality in a small Southern town in what appears to be the 1960s due to the vintage cars and clothes, and the slightly sepia toned images.[12] The imagery of police beating and eventually shooting black citizens recalls iconic images of the Civil Rights struggle. The repeated shots of Booker's character driving through or stopping at a crossroads in a lonely field, in conjunction with the bluesy track, seem to reference another guitar player-singer, Robert Johnson, who sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads to become a better musician, according to blues lore. The loose narrative reaches its climax when diegetic gunshots puncture the song, several citizens are killed, and Booker, after standing up to the police, is arrested. The song ends, and in the desolate silence we hear the diegetic sound of a train passing. The narrative resumes with a new song, Booker's more rocking "Wicked Waters." When the police make a traffic stop (clearly framed as an incident of racial profiling), Booker escapes from the car, running across a field while police gunfire follows him and the lyrics urge him on: "I'll make it on this run/I'm a new beginning/I will/Learn to love, oh/I am, what I am/I'll make it on this run." He runs until he reaches a club, where he quickly picks up a guitar and begins to play. Although the music could be diegetic here, it's not clear whether it is, in part because we don't see Booker singing the lyrics, and in part because his guitar playing doesn't seem to sync entirely to the song.

In this way, we might see *The Future is Slow Coming* as less beholden to music video conventions than *Thriller*, where Jackson's visual delivery of lyrics always syncs with the song. But *The Future is Slow Coming* doesn't neglect the music. If anything, it is much more driven by the music, as it doesn't include any dialogue and only minimal diegetic sounds. In her recent work, Vernallis has noted that music video narratives "have become more subtly worked and therefore more transparent" so that "one senses a complete film residing behind the clip" (*Unruly* 219). *The Future is Slow Coming* suggests such a shift. Booker and Lees's exploration of the space between music video and short film certainly diverges from *Thriller*'s but is nonetheless indebted to the earlier video's blending of music video and short film conventions.

At the same time that music video festivals like Los Angeles Music Video Festival have begun to showcase groundbreaking music video/short films, major film festivals, most notably Sundance, have started to recognize this work as well. In 2013, Sundance expanded from one short film category (an audience award), to eight shorts categories. That year they screened at least two music video/short films: Flying Lotus's *Until the Quiet Comes*, directed by Khalil Joseph, which won the Short Film Special Jury Award, and *Seraph* by Dash Shaw and John Cameron Mitchell, which features two of Sigur Rós's songs.[13] The latter was part of Sigur Rós's "Mystery Film Experiment," for which the band gave twelve directors a small budget and total artistic freedom to create a film based on the group's 2012 album *Valtari* ("Sigur Rós Launch").[14] Both videos are strikingly original. Joseph's impressionistic video for "Until the Quiet Comes" uses minimal diegetic sound and a single title – "Nickerson Gardens, Los Angeles" – as part of a rumination on the aesthetics of violence. Among the film's many striking images is a dead man who rises from the front yard where he has fallen and dances strangely and hypnotically out to the street, where he contorts his body into a car. In addition to winning the Short Film Special Jury Award at Sundance, *Until the Quiet Comes* notably also won the Video of the Year award at the UK Music Video Awards, hence demonstrating that it has been received (successfully, at that) as a short film and a music video. Joseph is certainly a music video/short filmmaker to watch. In addition to his festival success, his work has been featured at respectable venues such as Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art (Miranda, n.p.). Joseph has also proven, with his four

minute *Until the Quiet Comes*, that music videos no longer have to be long to be considered short films.

Seraph shares *Until the Quiet*'s darkness, but the film is much different aesthetically. A loosely narrative animated tale of a self-hating, self-mutilating boy, *Seraph* begins with non-song dialogue between the boy and his father, who preaches repression, and ends with the boy's murder in a prison yard and spiritual resurrection.[15] Both *Until the Quiet Comes* and *Seraph* are difficult films that nonetheless take meaningful cues from the music that inspired them. They arguably demonstrate a new chapter in the intertwined history of short film and music video that is open to more formal experimentation in part because not all music videos are as beholden to their promotional function as they once were. Neither of these films explicitly "sells" the song(s) on which it's based, even though the songs clearly provide impetus for the images.

The Internet has opened up a vast exhibition space for short works like these that challenge the status quo. As Susan Morrison notes in her introduction to a recent special issue of *CineAction* on long form drama and short subjects, "Culturally ignored and theatrically unfriendly, short films have been relegated to screenings at film festivals and art houses. However, the rise of the Internet as a venue for film watching has helped make these previously obscure films more accessible" (3). At least one major venue of this kind, *shortoftheweek.com*, includes a curated space for music videos among a variety of other "genres." The music videos included on the site are international in scope, and range from videos for well-known artists, like Kanye West's epic 34-minute *Runaway*, to the more obscure *Bad Motherf*cker* by Russian punk band Biting Elbows. The site also includes the two Sundance videos mentioned above, and some modern classics like the Arcade Fire's interactive *The Wilderness Downtown* project, and music video auteur Romain Gavras's video for M.I.A.'s "Born Free." None of these music videos are run-of-the-mill promotional vehicles, which might suggest that even the hybrid category music video/short film continues to exclude highly commercial music videos. Nonetheless, it is exciting to see these boundary-pushing works showcased online.

This essay has begun to trace a history of entanglement between short films and (mostly) long music videos and has sketched some recent developments that suggest the ongoing fruitfulness of considering these two forms together. There is certainly much more work to be done in this area. Some of this work might excavate key texts that have brought the formal and discursive features of short film and music video together, as I have done here with *Thriller*. Some of this work might further investigate sites such as film festivals and websites, but also galleries and museums, that include music videos, long or short, within the growing short film canon. As we continue to see these new sites open up, my hope is that they will celebrate aesthetically interesting music videos and short films without necessarily distinguishing between these forms. Regardless of what we call them, these works are as thrilling today as *Thriller* was over three decades ago.

Notes

[1] I discovered the term "music video/short film" through a process of trial and error searching on Google. This term and its reverse, "short film/music video," are especially common in job postings for editors and other production/post-production personnel.

[2] See, for instance, the collection *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* Eds. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

[3] *Thriller* is a notable exception that I'll return to shortly.

[4] This rule is not explicitly stated in the festival's submission guidelines, but two Palm Springs programmers I spoke with, independent of one another, told me with no uncertainty that the festival has a policy against screening music videos.

[5] In "Music Video Transformed," Mathias Bonde Korsgaard calls videos that include material beyond the song "long-form videos" (504). I have chosen instead to use the term "extended video" because "long-form video" has historically been associated with feature-length releases, some of which have been compilations of "short" videos and some of which, like Michael Jackson's oddity *Moonwalker* (1988), integrate videos into an overarching narrative.

[6] There's certainly a great deal more to be said about the representations of gender and sexuality in this video, but a more thorough discussion is outside the scope of this essay. See Kobena Mercer's excellent "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*" for more on these aspects of the song and video.

[7] It has also been widely noted that *Thriller*, along with Jackson's other two music videos from 1983, *Beat It* and *Billie Jean* played a major part in racially integrating MTV. See, for instance, Mittell 20-23. Because this aspect of *Thriller* is well covered elsewhere, I don't discuss it here.

[8] The *Thriller* clippings file at the Margaret Herrick Library includes ads from Los Angeles newspapers that document the theatrical run. It is worth noting that the double-billing with *Fantasia* was exceptionally odd. Jackson was a well-known Disney superfan, but some parents complained that the *Thriller* video was too scary to be paired with the Disney classic. According to an untitled tidbit from the November 29, 1983 issue of *Hollywood Reporter* (also found in the *Thriller* clippings file), the Avco theater suggested that parents take their kids to the lobby to eat popcorn during the *Thriller* screening. Again, an odd move for a theater.

[9] The *Hollywood Reporter* article is not entirely clear about whether the December 15th premier of the video on Showtime was also the TV premier of the "making of" package, but it does say that Showtime was to air the package. *Variety* reported that the MTV screening of the documentary package was the "world tv preem" but this seems unlikely given that the home video was already out by this time.

[10] The nomination form has the box next to "OSC Not Submitted" checked, and, underneath that, the box next to "Ineligible" checked. According a reference librarian I spoke with at the Margaret Herrick Library, there might have been other reasons for the film's ineligibility, but the only reason marked on the form was the failure to submit the official screen credits. This is a surprising reason for disqualification, given that the video itself includes these credits, so it

would not have been difficult for the production company, Optimum Productions, to submit them.

[11] It's difficult to assess this claim, given that there may have been music video festivals going back further than 2004 that are now defunct and hence don't have a strong web presence.

[12] A comment on the video's YouTube page from someone involved with the production says that the video was shot in and around Donaldsonville, Louisiana.

[13] In 2013, Korsgaard noted that the inclusion of "two or more songs" in a video was a growing trend among other "alternate length" music videos (504). This trend does not seem to have subsided as of 2016. *The Future is Slow Coming* and *Seraph* are just two of many examples.

[14] According to the band's site, as part of the "experiment" they also launched a competition where fans made videos to accompany the album – the group ended up choosing from over 800 entries.

[15] There is a long tradition of animated short films and animated music videos that is worth remarking, though it is beyond the scope of this essay to do justice to these histories.

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Teaching Short Films: Strategies, Possibilities, and Resources

Image Credit: http://seusachalin.xlphp.net/download/787-the-red-balloon-1956/

Cynthia Felando

Like many public school kids, I first saw the live-action fiction short *The Red Balloon* (Lamorisse, 1956) in primary school. I fell in love with it. The experience marked the beginning of my enduring appreciation for the short form, and it was followed by a pretty steady diet of other shorts. Later, during my tenure as a film programmer, I saw many, many more shorts and it was routine to encounter like-minded short film cinephiles, which both confirmed and added immeasurably to my own cinephilia. Likewise, when I taught my department's survey course, "Introduction to Film," I devoted one of the last class sessions to short films in order to enable an understanding of the continuity of short filmmaking in motion picture history, and to provide an expanded view of film in general. Since the students had seen several films from the early silent cinema era (including Edison, Lumiere brothers, and Charles Hepworth titles) they easily recognized and, to my delight, enjoyed the many ways that the visual and storytelling strategies in those early shorts resonated in the contemporary ones.

Yet, to my surprise, as I prepared to teach a film and media studies class that would focus on live-action, mostly fiction shorts in 2011, I discovered that my own and my students' apparent enthusiasm was shared by very few scholars. Quite simply, there was a compelling lack of attention to the form. With the exception of Richard Raskin's excellent 2002 monograph, *The Art of the Short Fiction Film: A Shot by Shot Study of Nine Modern Classics*, there has been a serious deficit of recently published material, which made it difficult to find sources to use as assigned readings. For the most part, academic discourses focus on experimental and animated shorts to the exclusion of live-action titles. Another challenge involved selecting and programming specific shorts because our field lacks a short film canon. As a result, with few exceptions--from the silent era mostly, the common organizational teaching strategy in which canonical titles are screened either exclusively or as introductory course material in order to provide a foundation for subsequent works was not an option. Nevertheless, the process of planning the class--selecting topics, films, and readings--was tremendously exciting because it

felt very much like charting unknown territory. And the good news for those interested in teaching a shorts-oriented course is that short film research has become an important new area in our field.

Indeed, the field of film and media studies is in the midst of a noteworthy expansion in terms of critical and scholarly interest in short-form media. For example, adding to his exceptional body of work as a scholar and filmmaker in this area, Richard Raskin's *Short Film Studies* journal was inaugurated in 2011, and the monograph I wrote, *Discovering Short Films: The History and Style of Live-Action Fiction Shorts* was published in 2015. Other scholars have recently started attending seriously to this previously overlooked form, and interest in developing systematic critical and academic approaches is certainly growing. Among other things, the film journal *CineAction* published a special issue that included several pieces about short media in 2014, and there has been an impressive collection of shorts-oriented papers and one full panel ("The Politics and Poetics of the Short Format Film and Video") invited to the annual Society for Cinema Studies conference, starting in 2015.

In this article, my aim is to provide a sense of the opportunities and possibilities involved in planning a short film course, and to offer a collection of specific strategies and resources for selecting and organizing subjects, screenings, and readings. Particular and detailed attention is given herein to two shorts-dedicated international festivals that provide an extraordinary range of teaching and research resources.

My short film course is included in my home department's (at the University of California, Santa Barbara) genre category and is oriented to providing an introductory level survey of the short-form landscape. Defining shorts as films with running times of up to sixty minutes, the quarter-long, ten-week term is organized according to three general categories: short films and history, specificity/theory, and criticism/analysis. The primary focus is on live-action fiction shorts, mostly stand-alone titles, though I also devote a week to omnibus and anthology films. There is roughly equal attention to both classical and art shorts, which are useful categories given their wide familiarity among film and media scholars for whom they are typically used in relation to the feature-length film. Very briefly, the classical short tends to be more highly plotted with easy to understand stories, goal-oriented protagonists and generally familiar character types, linear organization, and closed endings. In contrast, the art short is a much more diverse category in terms of storytelling, formal, and organizational strategies. The art short tends to be more character- than plot-oriented with looser, episodic, often ambiguous narratives, and open endings. In addition, more than the classical short, the art short's visual strategies are quite varied and range from naturalistic to surreal.

Within the two broad categories of classical and art shorts, I address several more specific components including genre shorts and auteur shorts. For the genre section, I present several that are common in feature-length films too, like the horror, science fiction, and gangster genres, as well as those that are far more common in shorts, especially the parody. As for auteur shorts, I include titles made by directors who tend to be best known for their feature-length films, including Martin Scorsese, Wes Anderson, and Ousmane Sembene, as well as those who are arguably as well known for their shorts as for their features, such as Lynne Ramsay and Spike Jonze. The course also considers content and thematic elements more commonly found in shorts

than in features, such as character portraits, a tendency to represent youth and coming-of-age stories, and the general refusal of successful love stories. The short's predilection for depicting fragments or moments of time, often conveyed in continuous time, is another significant aspect of the course. Further, given the short film's diversity in terms of running time, I address the storytelling differences between shorts with very brief running times (sometimes only seconds long) and those with running times of over thirty minutes that enable greater complexity.

A key course goal is to provide familiarity with and understanding of several canonical, or arguably canonical, titles from the early silent period, through the classical Hollywood and post-studio eras, and up to the present. In selecting titles for class screenings, I'm also thinking of a longer game regarding how those programming choices may contribute to the developing short film canon. In addition, in terms of the course as a whole, I screen both American and international titles from throughout film history. Of course, as instructors, we tend to organize our courses to explicitly or implicitly argue in favor of a particular set of issues and perspectives. My goals include demonstrating the ongoing significance of shorts *throughout* film history and, more specifically, emphasizing short film history as an important parallel to that of the feature, starting in the mid-1910s when the feature-length film supplanted the short as the dominant studio production form in the live-action fiction realm.

The course is roughly organized according to three categories: silent, classical, and post-studio-era shorts. In terms of the continuities between the three categories, it's the case that many of the storytelling and formal strategies used in shorts in the silent and classical eras are also present in post-studio era shorts. Yet it is also the case that due to the dismantling of the major studios' short film units and the far-reaching influence of European art films during the period, storytelling and formal strategies, as well as running times, expanded significantly. Thus, in addition to being oriented to conveying the significance of short films to film history in general, the course emphasizes the continuing legacy of visual and storytelling strategies developed during the early and later silent cinema eras. To make the point, I screen a selection of canonical shorts from the early silent cinema era, including the Lumiere brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory* (1895) and *The Waterer Watered/L'Arroseur Arrosé* (1895), and the Edison Company's *Annabelle Serpentine Dance* (1896). The titles are useful for demonstrating Tom Gunning's concept of the "cinema of attraction," in which story is deemphasized in favor of a more exhibitionist-style display or presentation, or series of views, which often explicitly acknowledge the audience. In addition, *Waterer* is helpful for demonstrating the strength of a spare narrative as well as the "gag" structure in the short form. To convey the resilience of this set of visual and storytelling strategies, I screen a selection of more recent titles that use similar cinema of attraction and gag techniques.[i]

In our current short film landscape, comedies tend to be favored by filmmakers, programmers, distributors, and audiences, which was also true during the silent and classical Hollywood eras. As a result, I screen several canonical comedy shorts from the silent era, including, Buster Keaton's classic, *One Week* (1922), which works well for its simple story conveyed largely by means of visual, slapstick-style comedy techniques, which are strategies that endure in more recent shorts, many of which, like *One Week,* are also dialogue free. Here too, I screen recent titles that use similar techniques.[ii]

A significant part of the course component that addresses the post-studio era of short filmmaking considers the development of the art short in the context of the widespread influence of the European art film. Arguing that the European New Waves first gained traction with short films, I make the case by screening several European shorts including *The Red Balloon*, Roman Polanski's *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958), *Les Mistons/The Brats* (Truffaut, 1957), *La Premiere Nuit* (Franju, 1958), and *Charlotte et Veronique/All Boys Are Called Patrick* (Godard, 1959). The films convey the diversity and extraordinary legacy of the art short and provide a strong foundation for the appreciation and analyses of subsequent art shorts.

Another important aspect of the course involves identifying and describing several factors that enable an understanding of the fiction short's specificity and conventions. Perhaps not surprisingly, classical Hollywood's feature-length film provides a useful point of comparison. For example, one of the striking differences between features and shorts concerns the notion of "unity," which also is arguably one of the short film's most distinctive aspects. Specifically, in classical Hollywood's feature-length film, the concept of narrative unity refers to the careful interweaving of more than one storyline into a coherent whole to ease viewer understanding. As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson explain: "When all the relationships we perceive within a film are clear and economically interwoven, we say that the film has *unity*. We call a unified film tight, because there seem to be no gaps in the formal relationships" (70-71). But, in the short fiction film, the concept of unity refers to something else entirely: economical and narrowly focused narratives. In general, the fiction short refuses the feature film's elaborately developed plots, subplots, goal-oriented characters, and complex causal chains. Instead, both the classical and art short favor the narrative economy and unity that are enabled by the short's most basic storytelling conventions: a simple story that focuses on a single event, character, situation, or moment with no subplots; fewer characters--usually only one or two central and few (or no) secondary characters; and a brief story time.

In terms of specific content and thematic issues, there are other significant differences between shorts and feature-length films, including their disparate approaches to the representation of love and romance. Very simply, the fiction short tends to depict fewer love stories than the feature-length film. As David Bordwell notes, classical Hollywood's feature-length films usually have two storylines, one of which involves heterosexual romance (157-159), and it's one of the feature's most persistent narrative elements. The difference is due in part to the short's most characteristic feature--its brevity; but there's an historical component too. The film historian Kristin Thompson has identified a link between running time and the attention to love or romance in her research on the transition from one- and two-reel films to the multiple-reel, feature-length film between 1909 and 1917. She explains that, as films became longer, "the greater length…gave the romance more prominence" (176). In the case of the short fiction film, even when love and romance are central to the narrative, they usually do not lead to the familiar feature-length film ending in which the couple lives "happily ever after." To make the point in my class, in addition to the many shorts I screen throughout the term that entirely avoid love or romance, I show several that suggest the possibility of a love story but end without fulfilling the promise.[iii]

My academic interest in shorts is informed by my experience as both a film scholar and programmer and, while planning and refining my course, I have drawn upon both areas to select and organize titles. I have found useful material in some perhaps unexpected--or at least underexplored--places, including short film festivals and reference books addressed to and written by primary and secondary school teachers in the United States. Specifically, in the 1960s and 1970s, when great numbers of shorts, both commercial and educational, were widely distributed non-theatrically (especially to schools), a number of short film teachers and enthusiasts published reference books to encourage other teachers to use shorts in the classroom. The authors provided lengthy lists and synopses of recommended titles that could be used for a variety of pedagogical purposes that included facilitating students' general aesthetic and film appreciation. The books have been valuable in my own research and course preparation because the authors identify titles that, although perhaps less well known today, became familiar to scores of students and teachers so they offer several canonical possibilities. The most helpful and comprehensive volume I have found is George Rehrauer's *The Short Film: An Evaluative Selection of 500 Recommended Films*.

More obvious as a short film resource is the handful of well-curated websites that provide access to shorts that have won awards or otherwise have captured the attention of site curators. Often organized generically, by time period, and sometime by running time, the sites include synopses and commentary of varying lengths. Although there are many sites dedicated to shorts, besides the familiar generally non-curated ones YouTube and Vimeo, two that I have found especially useful are www.filmsshort.com and www.shortoftheweek.com, both of which are well organized and thoughtfully curated.

Shorts-dedicated film festivals are also worth noting for their rich research value, especially for featuring both historical and contemporary shorts. Two of the largest, longest-running, and most prestigious short film festivals are the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen in Germany and the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival in France, which have provided useful and exciting, and often unexpected, dimensions for researching shorts. Although there are more than three hundred festivals around the world dedicated solely to short films, Oberhausen and Clermont-Ferrand are exceptional resources because both have fascinating histories and a commitment to careful, often scholarly, approaches to programming old and new short films. In terms of research and teaching possibilities, short film is an extremely flexible category, which can be daunting due to the huge numbers of shorts produced and exhibited each year, not to mention the thousands of titles from throughout film history. As a result, explorations of short film festivals and their programming and exhibition strategies are useful for enabling scholars and teachers to navigate the unwieldy terrain of shorts, and for providing ways to organize the vast numbers and varieties of shorts. In addition, the festivals have made far-reaching contributions to short film history; indeed, in the developing canon of short films, one finds many titles that became widely known after their festival premieres. For example, it was international festivals, including Oberhausen, which launched the now-legendary live-action short, *Two Men and a Wardrobe*, Roman Polanski's 1958 avant-garde student film about a pair of young men who inexplicably emerge from the sea while carrying the titular wardrobe. As they journey through the local town, they encounter considerable hostility and also witness a variety of what seems to be routine acts of violence. Since its premiere, *Two Men* has become a touchstone in the history of short films, and it's inevitably included in short film reference books

(including George Rehrauer's). Richard Raskin deems the film both a "masterpiece" and a "landmark" in the development of the short form, and he further argues that its combination of experimental and narrative strategies initiated the "modern short fiction film" (1-2).

To convey the scope of the Oberhausen and Clermont-Ferrand festivals, both historically and in the diversity of their content and programming, it's worth noting the origins and development of both. Of course, like their features-oriented counterparts, the festivals enable the short film scholar and enthusiast to stay abreast of emerging trends, filmmakers, and national cinemas. Likewise, their programming and curatorial methods are instructive for those of us organizing our own short film screenings in and out of the classroom. Oberhausen was founded in 1954, with an educational mandate to provide an alternative to the "standardized film products appearing in commercial cinemas" (Fehrenbach 232). Accredited by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations, it is both the oldest and one of the largest short film festivals in the world. A competitive six-day-long festival, it is often described as a "Mecca" (like Clermont-Ferrand) for the modern short film (Gaydos 85). The term is apt: in six days, close to 500 films are screened, which are selected from over 6,000 submissions from 90 countries, and which are organized into approximately 100 individual programs. Early on, Oberhausen earned a reputation for programming ambitious and also ideologically and aesthetically diverse films. As Gareth Evans notes, the festival remains highly regarded for a commitment to "experimentation in form and content," and for an apparent resistance to slick "calling card" shorts, which filmmakers use to demonstrate their technical and artistic skills in the hopes of securing future work (5).

Testament to Oberhausen's ambitions and range is that each year the festival offers an extensive themed program, which is organized (in part) by guest curators. The theme for a recent edition was "Shooting Animals: A Brief History of Animal Film," which included eleven programs curated by the philosopher/biologist Cord Riechelman and filmmaker/curator Marcel Schwierin. Each of the titles depicts real animals, and the shorts were culled from the collections found at an assortment film, scientific, and natural history archives. In 2012, the featured theme was: "Provoking Reality: Mavericks, MouveMents, Manifestos," which celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Oberhausen Manifesto along with restored shorts made by several Manifesto filmmakers, and titles from five other national cinema "movements."[iv] Oberhausen is especially productive for scholars because it focuses on new international works as well as shorts from throughout cinema history. For example, a special 1994 "Retrospective of the Japanese Short Film" was a large-scale effort of more than one hundred films produced between 1950 and 1994. In addition, Oberhausen is noteworthy for calling attention to emerging national cinemas and, toward that end, it has programmed titles from Ecuador, Latvia, Singapore, and Uganda, among many others. During its long history Oberhausen has presented a variety of profiles on individual filmmakers, particular film eras, and film institutions—including film schools and production companies. In 1997, a special profile focused on "American Comedies of the Silent Movie Era," and a more recent edition included profiles of two shorts filmmakers, the Polish director Grzegorz Krolikiewicz and the California director William E. Jones, as well as a profile on Pathé Production films from 1907. Even better for short film researchers is that Oberhausen's retrospectives and other special programs are often accompanied by special-edition books that include details for the individual programs, along with several specially commissioned academic- and filmmaker-authored essays. Many of the books and festival catalogues are available online at Oberhausen's official website (http://www.kurzfilmtage.de/en/).

The second "Mecca" for shorts, Clermont-Ferrand (http://www.clermont-filmfest.com/) is a nine-day event that has been called the most prestigious international short film festival in the world. In *The Variety Guide to Film Festivals*, Steven Gaydos refers to it as the "Cannes of Short Films" because it is second only to Cannes in the numbers of attendees is attracts each year (53). Clermont-Ferrand originated as a "Short Film Week" that was organized by the student-run Clermont-Ferrand University Film Society. After three years of successful screenings, the event was renamed "Sauve qui peut le court metrage" (Save the short film), and the new and competitive festival was officially launched in 1982. Clermont-Ferrand is considered more receptive to calling card shorts than Oberhausen, but it also programs "rougher" films, including student works, which are appreciated as much as those with higher production values (Barwell 77). Like Oberhausen, Clermont-Ferrand has a rigorous selection process, with separate programming committees for its three competition sections: national, international, and digital. Also, like Oberhausen, Clermont-Ferrand offers several profiles and retrospectives, along with panels and seminars each year. One recent edition included a major showcase, "Cuba Today," with six programs of forty-one films made during the preceding ten years by a younger generation of Cuban filmmakers. The diversity of the festival is further suggested by some of the special programs: In 2012, for example, along with an "African Perspectives" profile of French-language films made by African filmmakers, there was an Alexander Kluge profile for the festival's own Oberhausen Manifesto celebration. The festival's spirit of adventure is suggested by a rather more fanciful recent profile, "Flies and Other Bugs," which offered three programs of shorts that featured a variety of creepy crawlies made between 1932 and 2011. As Claire Barwell enthused, festivals like Clermont-Ferrand offer short films a "rare '*espace du liberté*' in the cinema"—meaning: their *own* space (78), which is reflected in the wide range of themes and subjects, as well as the sheer numbers of shorts screened. The festival's commitment to and appreciation for an enormous variety of shorts conveys the many ways it can be instructive for course preparation purposes. Certainly, Oberhausen and Clermont-Ferrand are not the only painstakingly programmed and curated festivals that feature shorts; however, because most shorts festivals (especially those in the United States) focus exclusively on new shorts, they lack the strong historical dimensions of their two European counterparts.

The Oberhausen and Clermont-Ferrand festivals have been enormously inspiring, not only for expanding my own understanding of and enthusiasm for the scope of short filmmaking throughout film history, but also for enabling a special focus unique to each term I have taught my shorts course, including components on individual filmmakers, national cinemas, and institutions. In addition, I provide links on the course website for both festivals (as well as several others), and students have noted their usefulness for encouraging a more expansive view of the short media category and for influencing their own short film research and film projects.

When I first had the opportunity to teach my short film course in 2011, I was unable to locate other shorts-oriented courses that focus specifically on the history, theory, and analysis/criticism of shorts, without a production component, which might provide guidance and inspiration for my own pedagogical purposes. My hope is that the course development strategies, approaches, and resources I've highlighted herein will help to encourage other short film cinephiles and scholars to teach their own shorts courses.

Notes

[i] Titles that demonstrate the "cinema of attraction" mode include *The Dance Lesson/La Leçon de Danse* (Prouff, 2006) and *Rendezvous/C'était un Rendezvous* (Lelouch, 1976). The gag mode is well demonstrated by *Desserts* (Stark, 1998) and *The Black Hole* (Sansom and Williams, 2008).

[ii] Excellent recent titles include *Signing Off* (Sarkies, 1997), which has dialogue, and *Inside- Out* (Guard and Guard, 1999), which has no dialogue.

[iii] In addition to *Inside-Out*, which uses silent era comedy strategies and is noted above, other titles include *The Jacket* (Vollrath, 2014), *Kitchen Sink* (Maclean, 1989), and the short parody, *George Lucas in Love* (Nussbaum, 1999).

[iv] A group of young radicals and aspiring filmmakers presented the manifesto during the festival in order to declare their commitment to the short film and "new" filmmaking trends and styles associated with the European New Waves. See Fehrenbach 223-225.

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Interview with Filmmaker Jennifer Reeder

Image Credit: http://www.redcat.org/event/three-films-jennifer-reeder

Sarah Hanssen

Filmmaker Jennifer Reeder constructs short personal films about relationships, trauma, and coping. Her newest short film, *Crystal Lake* (2016), is a fictional portrait of Muslim teen girls who take over a skate park at midnight, with provocative imagery and strong performances by young actors in dazzling costumes. Another recent short, *Blood Below The Skin* (2015), about three teenage girls preparing for prom, world premiered at the 2015 Berlin Film Festival. Reeder is currently in development on two new films--a feature-length teen film set in rural Kentucky called *As With Knives And Skin*, as well as a speculative fictional take on Hansel and Gretel called *All Small Bodies*. Reeder also founded a social justice initiative called Tracers Book Club that was awarded a Propeller Fund Grant for a year of radical programming on the theme of "women's work."

Tracers Book Club is an impressive feminist undertaking and brings together a wide variety of people at public events, like the panels held in 2014, at the Threewalls Gallery in Chicago, which considered motherhood, race, and LGBTQ issues. In an August 2014 interview with *The Lantern*, Reeder discussed an art exhibit curated by Tracers: "We hope to spark ideas about what gender looks like, how it manifests and how we as humans present gender" (n.p.). The exhibit was less a conventional art show and more of a gathering for discussions, events, and collections of thought provoking cultural paraphernalia.

Reeder is the Head of the Art Department in the School of Art and Art History at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has said she does not limit herself to the confines of a gallery, or other more typical venues for creative expression. I wanted to interview Reeder for this short film issue because her work has been getting a lot of attention beyond the realms of art film, galleries, and experimental venues. She's said, "I went to art school, not film school and I came to filmmaking as a dancer – much like Maya Deren." Recently, she's begun crossing over and reaching audiences who aren't versed in

the language of experimental cinema, like those at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival where her short film *A Million Miles Away* premiered. This unusual coming-of-age short about a high school girls in suburban Ohio went on to be featured on the curated website shortoftheweek.com. In addition, she has received a Creative Capital Award for her first feature film; and she attended the Independent Feature Project's Independent Film Week in New York City where she participated in the "Emerging Storytellers" section of the Project Forum. It's inspiring to see a female filmmaker who has forged her own creative, political, and professional path getting the wider recognition her work deserves.

Sarah Hanssen: Your films deal with a feminine realm that doesn't normally get a lot of screen time, that said, do you feel like you are speaking to and for an under-represented demographic, specifically adolescent girls? How does that inform your creative process?

Jennifer Reeder: It is for sure the case that I make films about and for teenage girls. In my opinion, the majority of contemporary films made for and about teen and adolescent girls are inaccurate. I am trying to correct this discrepancy. In terms of the creative process, every decision is focused toward making a sensitive and realistic portrait of girlhood. This goal affects everything from casting to the camera we use, to the music, and art direction, etc.

SH: You've been making films for a long time. Can you describe the development of your filmmaking career? How did you begin? How has your process and purpose changed over the years? Whom do you make films for now, as opposed to when you began? Why?

JR: I have been making films for over twenty years and, although the earlier work was more experimental and less narrative in form, I was still "telling stories" about unruly women. Since *White Trash Girl* (1995), which was my first film to receive any major attention, I have been more or less making the same film over and over again. I came to filmmaking through dance. I was a ballet dancer for a long time and, when I started my undergrad degree, I was taking dance and visual art classes (along with a hefty dose of Women's Studies). After doing very poorly in the visual art part (sculpture), it was suggested that I take a performance class. We made videos in that class and, during that process, I very much felt that I had recovered a phantom limb. I am a storyteller – I get that from my paternal grandmother. My films have organically evolved from less narrative to more narrative. I think it has to do also with being, in general, less interested in abstraction or visual art. As I get older, I just want people to understand what I am saying and be invested in my subjects/characters.

SH: When presenting work that deals with the world of teenage girls, which is a different language than the average viewer is accustomed to, it seems you have to tread a fine line between being authentic to that young female experience and being approachable to audiences. How do you reconcile that?

JR: In real life, young girls have very little agency. I seek out those tiny bits and moments where this is not the case and put all that into the film. It's about the sighs and the glances and the secret language and the deep understanding they naturally possess about the adult world around them. I try to highlight the agency – the girls are the heroes. So far, my films have appealed to a pretty wide audience – I have gotten lots of positive responses from old men for instance. I have not found it hard to make films that portray the world of girlhood without alienating non-girl audiences. The girls want what we ALL want – they want to be seen and heard on their own terms.

SH: How has your work been received? Obviously, you have traveled to many film festivals around the world and have had many sold out screenings, but how do people respond to the work? What would you wish was different about audiences? How have you been surprised at screenings?

JR: I am surprised that these weird little films about American girls have garnered such a supportive worldwide audience. All sorts of people really love these films. It's truly awesome! This all happened without me compromising my "vision." I am making exactly the films I want to make. The only difficulty is getting short films into distribution. Short films really only exist on the film festival circuit (with some broadcasting opportunity in Europe). I am in pre-pre-production for my first proper feature length film – which is of course about teen girls, and I anticipate that this will have a much wider appeal (I am aiming for a theatrical release).

SH: Can you tell us a little bit about this feature and how it fits into your creative journey?

JR: *As With Knives And Skin* is a feature-length narrative film—a feminist teen noir that chronicles the lives of three girls in rural Kentucky who form a bond in the aftermath of another girl's sudden disappearance. Sophomore year of high school turns less typical when a series of unexpected traumas accelerates the coming-of-age process. This Southern gothic drama presents girlhood as a revolution. *As With Knives* is a film about girls and for girls because girls matter, but it's also a film for everyone, because girlhood is awesome and coming of age is a life-long process. My films offer a fresh take on female experiences and, in this case, teenagers. I have produced over 46 film/video works since picking up my first camera. My interest in writing and directing narrative projects is not a rejection of the radical video-art history I am part of. The trajectory from my earlier, perhaps more obviously agenda-based film/video projects, to my more recent projects, is direct and organic. My practice remains a form of social justice and I am dedicated to the history and future of cinema as both entertainment and art form.

SH: I hear you use terms like "girlhood" and "grrrl" a lot, what does the word "grrrl" mean to you?

JR: It means agency and autonomy. It means living on one's own terms. It's about empowerment. It's about feminism without explicitly using that term (which some people still find challenging).

SH: On a totally different note, one of my favorite things about your films is the way in which you use text. Sometimes the onscreen text corresponds to inner thoughts, or diary entries, or text messages. Can you talk about your use of text specifically?

JR: Subtitling non-audible or non-verbal language is just not something that can ever happen in real life and so I want that to happen on screen. My films are fictional, so why not expand that form? Artfulness and wonder is part of my process. I am not required to stay within the realm of "in real life." So I don't. Plus, revealing secrets to the audience brings them into the story – closer to the characters. My films are about intimacy and the reveal that happens in the text sequences is intimate without being sexual or graphic.

SH: Have you always worked with actors? When did that develop in your work? Your performances have an unusual style. How do you direct your performers?

JR: I used to be a performer in my films and I would wrangle my non-professional friends into getting in front of my camera as well. I have been using professional actors (working from a script) for over ten years now. People often think the performances are improvised, which they are not – I am quite strict about keeping with the written lines. Recently I have cast a lot of comedy/improv performers in the serious adult roles and I have consistently cast a teenager to play a teenager. The teenage performers are usually not highly experienced in front of a film camera but they all have some theatrical experience and their performances are authentic – they are living what their characters are living.

SH: You've achieved a degree of success that many aspiring filmmakers would admire. What advice would you give to filmmakers who feel marginalized?

JR: Just keep making the work. Make the films no matter what – make them for yourself. Think of success as the means, not the end.

SH: It can be lonesome out there trying to make this work. Where do you see female work prospering today?

JR: I think it's a good time to be a woman behind the camera. In my opinion, the best new narratives are being made by women—Gina Kim, Eliza Hittman, Ana Lily Amirpour, Dee Rees, Carol Morley, Miranda July, Kelly Reichardt, Josephine Decker, Jamie Babbit, Céline Sciamma, Andrea Arnold, and so on. Not to mention TV with *Transparent* and *Orange Is the New Black* and *Top of the Lake*. Having said all that, it's still an uphill battle with a lot of dudes up there at the top of the hill. We must keep fighting forward and making really fucking good TV and film.

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