

Short Film in Germany
Study on the Situation of German Short Film

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What is cinema - what is short film?

In the early days of cinema, all films were short films. This is a banal acknowledgement and really nothing remarkable as such. But what is interesting is that, after over one hundred years of technical and aesthetic advances, some of the characteristics and criteria that identified short film back then are still valid today: short film is defined by its length. The short form is also a medium for innovation, as versatile as cinema itself. Looking at things from this historical perspective, we can perhaps succeed at circumventing some of the difficulties we face in defining what exactly short film is.

Attempt at a definition: the short film is a film that's short

In trying to define short film, we automatically face the dilemma that, apart from its running time, there are no precise criteria or unequivocal characteristics that apply to all short films. Analogies from the world of literature are also bound to fail, because the short story that is often invoked for comparison is limited to the realm of fiction only - to stories. Deductions based on the poetics and dramaturgy of short film, while these are certainly helpful and can be applied with some success, are consequently valid only for the short fiction film.

The definition dilemma arises when we overlook the fact that „short film“ is not a genre description or category but rather a generic term used ever since the early days of cinema to describe all possible forms and genres of film. What makes short film interesting, though, is not its reduction to an indistinguishable format, but above all its hybrid variety. In the short film, elements of early cinema live on into the present. It parades before us the broad panoply of life in every imaginable form: from boxing kangaroos, dancing cigarettes and flying hats, to trains arriving at the station and light reflected on wet asphalt, to magic tricks and fairytale journeys to the moon. It encompasses both black-and-white and hand-coloured films, documentaries, fiction, experimental films, animation, dramas and melodramas, thrillers and horror films, slapstick and comedy, as well as commercials, cultural and educational films and artists' films.

Short film preserves the early diversity of the cinema, while history has increasingly forced „big-screen cinema“ into narrowly constricted boundaries. The feature-length fiction film with sound has dominated the movies since at least the 1920s. Standards and conventions were developed that encompass all possible aspects - from artistic design to technical standards and commercial production methods, from screenplay development and shooting to distribution and modern marketing. This has all served to establish a single uniform concept of film that - although it accounts for only a small excerpt of all possible options - seems to stand for film as a whole. In the vernacular, the (marketing) success of this concept is revealed by expressions like „true cinema“ or „a real movie“.

There is no room for the short film, however - as perhaps sub-category or genre - under this very narrow idea of film, which only defines one of myriad cinematic possibilities. Depending on one's perspective, short film instead can be viewed as coming before, or being situated above or outside this historical reduction of film and cinema.

Short film thus lives on outside standardized mainstream cinema and has evolved into a kind of great white hope for all that early cinema promised in terms of aesthetic complexity and plurality of content. It is rife with potential - potential that can also be tapped,

however, by feature-length film. By no means do all short films realize this potential, since they likewise can be part of the mainstream.

Economic independence and creative freedom in short film

When a short film does manage to live up to its potential, however, (which, unlike with feature-length film, happens with regularity) it still has a special quality that cannot be attributed to its running time alone. Length as distinguishing feature is not a time norm, but rather a financial factor in its production that allows short film a certain independence from the film industry with its economic restraints.

Most filmmakers share this view. They choose the short form above all because it allows them to combine economic independence with artistic freedom. As a case in point, almost all of the filmmakers interviewed for the 2005 publication »Überraschende Begegnungen der kurzen Art« („Surprising Encounters of the Short Kind“, edited by Peter Kremser, in German only) stated that they do not categorically differentiate between short and long films.

The less effort and costs required to produce a film, the less the economic pressure and the financial risk. Economic freedom leaves room for experimentation and innovation. That is the strength of short film.

Aesthetic and technical innovation - short film as source of inspiration

On the „big screen“, the technical and thematic standards as well as the formal conventions that prevail tend to resist every attempt at refinement and a deeper anchoring in visual culture, resulting in reduced cinematic expressiveness and a general „dumbing-down“ of the cultural context. This reduction can very well still give birth to cinematic masterpieces that later become „classics“, but as a rule it leads only to films as mass-produced consumer goods. Without any stimulus from outside, i.e. from beyond the conventional system, styles, genres and categories become rigid, at some point merely treading water and drowning in their own conventions. The short film can serve here as a source of fresh inspiration.

It would be hard to find an innovation in film aesthetics that was not first „invented“ and tried out in short film. Due to a lack of the requisite knowledge and research, this fact is often overlooked in historical writing on film and in film criticism. Innovations are assumed to represent an unprecedented „revolution“ or are likely to be ascribed to a genius (when all the while a lesser-known short film was perhaps the true source!). Whether stop-action, close-up, jump cuts, direct cinema, non-linear narrative, hybrid film, handheld camera or dogma style - all of these were pioneered by short film and then absorbed by osmosis into the mainstream to serve its own revitalization.

The short film also plays a crucial role in the field of technical innovation. Digitization at the cinema, for example, would be inconceivable without short film. From electronic image processing and production (software) to digital formats (data media) to digital distribution (Internet, mobile phones), everything new under the sun was first tried out in short film. And the test content for the new digital pre-platforms is still made up of short films.

There are not only economic and technical reasons, such as lower production costs and shorter running times requiring less bandwidth, that make short film the pioneering format in the new media; its status is also attributable to its formal diversity, its topicality and the abundance of themes and material it presents. From the broad repertoire of short films available, suitable material can be found for every application, every intellectual level and every target group.

Variety

In Germany today, a broad spectrum of short film forms and currents coexist and intermingle, giving rise to just as many sales channels, screening forms and film scenes. It's true that short film is also the chosen medium for so-called „finger exercises“, used as a calling card by young filmmakers just embarking on careers in other areas. But that's not all it is. Short film is also a favoured medium for professional works. It is created individually or collectively, or perhaps by a team of private desktops at home or at film school, but also in high-tech production studios and artist's ateliers.

It is viewed at the cinema or on television, but not only there. It blinks out at us from our computer screen as a Flash animation on the Internet, or as an ultra-short, entertaining micromovie on our mobile phone display. It also serves as a visual aid for serious instruction and as discussion material in educational work with both young people and adults. It can be seen in corporate in-house presentations and during manager training courses. The short film can even be an artwork in a museum or exhibition, or a collector's item sold on the art market.

All of this leads us to the inevitable conclusion that there is no such thing as the typical short film. Every single sector, every one of the many short film genres and each variety of film has its own aesthetic, its own sales channels and its own audience. Each of these sub-areas may seem marginal on its own, but the sum produces an amazing panorama! - a repertoire of film forms that keeps reinventing the diversity of early cinema over and over again, and that has continued to evolve and innovate both aesthetically and technically.

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Summary

Note to the Summary

This summary is not intended to replace the material contained in the individual sections. Instead it provides in a compact form several results from the survey that in the authors' opinion are particularly noteworthy. Ultimately it is for the readers themselves to draw their own conclusions from the study, while the data and material collected remains available and open to all further interpretations.

Production

The volume of short film productions in Germany is growing consistently. At approx. 2,000 new short films per annum, there are more than twice as many shorts being produced in Germany than ten years ago. And this growth tendency is being sustained.

In general the various film categories demonstrate stable production levels with each other to a major extent, and that over a longer time period. The largest share is represented by short fiction films at almost 40% of the overall production. Noteworthy however - especially in comparison to other countries too - is the large share of experimental and art films respectively (more than 20%) made in Germany. Equally remarkable is the development of new hybrid forms that combine the features of animation, fiction, documentary and experimental films with each other - often under the influence of digital technologies - and which do not permit themselves to be classified under any of the classic categories.

German short film production is distinguished by a major share of own, independent productions in which the filmmaker, in addition to the screenwriting and editing, is also responsible for the production. These represent more than half of all the short films produced in Germany. The share of short films made by production companies has dropped over the last years. Established production companies which also operate successfully on the cinema and TV markets were only noted in exceptional cases during the period of the survey.

It is only the major film schools which cultivate co-operative activities with the cinema and television industries, which in completely concrete terms are reflected in co-productions and TV broadcasts. The large number of training facilities in which short films are made as practice films, „calling cards“ or as independent film forms make a significant contribution to the high short film production volume in Germany. While by now these forms of film have due to their relationship with film schools been reduced in the public perception to „practice films“, on the other hand the dynamic power, innovation and creativity of short film is founded on this constant inflow of new talent and new ideas.

Production companies and third level colleges enjoy structural advantages that disadvantage the group of author producers who are unable to achieve a corresponding acceptance of their production share in all the areas of short film financing, distribution and presentation.

In particular the group of filmmakers who mainly produce experimental and art films are obliged to make their living in other areas and finance their films from their own resources. To some extent however they have tapped into new sources of finance and are now economically successfully on the art market.

Financing

As with feature films, short films can only be financed by bundling together various sources of finance. However with short film, a far greater number of filmmakers or producers cover their production outlays almost completely by means of deferrals than is the case when producing feature length films.

The production budgets differ considerably and can lie between €50 and over €150,000 for films with a high, non-charged deferral share and calculated in accordance with the individual production cost items at market prices. The share of liquid funds is on average about one third, which deferrals represent just under 50%.

Film Funding

On the German federal government level almost €1.4 million in funding is available annually for short film (from the German Federal Representative for Culture and Media (BKM), the FFA German film funding body and the Young German Film Kuratorium). At just 1.92% (2004) of the total film funding amount, the share available to short film is still minimal and lower than it was ten years ago. However in absolute terms, the amounts of funding have clearly increased during the same time period.

On the German federal states (i.e. Länder) level, film funding has changed significantly over the last years. Economic aspects of film funding are coming to the fore increasingly, which has been disadvantageous for short film. In 2004 a total of €1.8 million in funding was available for short film in the German federal states. Its share of the overall funding amounted to only 1.37%, while in 1996 this was still more than 3.5%. In view of the production volume which has more than doubled, there is an urgent need for action on a federal states level in favour of funding short films.

Several of the guidelines issued by the film funding bodies do indeed classify short film as a category with unique production and distribution aspects. However the conditions for awarding funding and the application guidelines mostly correspond to those for long films, through which they fail to target the realities of producing and exploiting short film.

Equally problematic is the preference accorded to individual film categories or producer groups. In particular art films and filmmakers who have „outgrown“ the age deemed suitable for up-and-coming talent are disadvantaged structurally - through procedural conditions, pigeonholing and regulations.

Revenues for Cash Prizes

Prizes and awards in the form of cash and facilities are extremely important in the short film field and can be regarded as a pillar of short film financing due to the high intensity of festivals and competitions typical in short film. According to the incomplete details available for 2004, at least €700,000 in prize money was awarded. Although certain producer groups may enjoy advantages as per the conditions when applying for open competitions and the decisions of festival juries can lead to an accumulation of prizes for individual films, thanks to the fact that they are so widely spread the prizes are able to balance out to some extent the disadvantages and distortions vis-à-vis other income sources.

Sales and Distribution

In comparison to the structures in the feature film area, the professional trading in licences with screening rights for short films in which the individual broadcast, screening and usage rights are calculated for the various customer groups has only been developed to a minimum extent in Germany, with the majority of these sales and distribution activities being undertaken by the filmmakers and producers themselves.

With both sales and distribution, short film demonstrates one unique aspect in that a smaller commercial area must be separated from a clearly larger non-commercial area. And this area in turn covers such widely differing fields as film festivals or religious and/or training policy oriented media offices and central media bodies.

At present more than 1,500 German short films are available in Germany for distribution. From the 2003 and 2004 production years 86 and 58 films respectively were picked up by distributors. More than a third of the films are with commercial distributors. However the actual number of film titles available via distributors is clearly higher as the complex structures in the training sector especially meant that it was almost impossible to compile data for the survey.

One of the larger problems for commercial distributors of short films is that they have been excluded so-to-speak from the value chain between the feature film distributor and the actual screening. This is because there is no acceptable film fee billing system that permits the short film to participate in the cinema box office revenues.

The major commercial distributors have withdrawn from the short film sector to a major extent. Instead of this however, the short film area itself could build up a functioning commercial distribution structure.

Both with sales and distribution, in the commercial sector those fiction and animation films with the shortest possible running times are preferred.

Unlike with the commercial sales and distribution area, short documentaries dominate the repertoire of the non-commercial bodies, ahead of both short fiction and animation films. In the training sector especially longer running times are also demanded.

The non-commercial training sector regret that ever diminishing amounts of funding are available for film acquisition. In the context of promoting media competencies the technical aspects are often to the fore, while the money required for the content intended to convey and communicate these new technological structures is lacking.

Overall the distributors of short films form a versatile picture with many highly diverse operators offering various film forms for a wide range of screening opportunities. With both the commercial distribution field and for the various suppliers in the non-commercial sector one aspect is true for all the short film areas: Without the high commitment, generous idealism and additional activities of the various operators, this area could not survive. As a rule staffing and finance are both very tight, so that in part films cannot be picked up by the distributors to the extent desirable.

Archives

Archives are central locations for conveying and communicating short films as cultural-historic documents. They fulfil their tasks by means of collection, protection, contextual and publication activities, as well as through co-operative activities with academics. Several archives have also assumed an important function as distributors to the extent that they also provide the general public with access to short films.

Unfortunately there is no central German search catalogue on the inventory of short films in the archives and also no directory or index of the criteria under which short films are archived and how they can be accessed.

In addition to state, municipal and private archives, festival archives play a special role in maintaining this cultural legacy.

One worrisome fact is that four of the seven archives which participated in the survey have announced that in future due to their financial and staffing situations they will not be able to service and maintain their inventories of short films to a sufficient extent. In addition to major inventories of films that have not even been viewed or compiled, there are many film prints which must be protected from dye fading or vinegar syndrome or where the film strips need to be repaired due to damage through use.

The approaching digitisation of cinemas will confront the archives with new issues: Should films be maintained in their original footage or should the archival material be digitised? During restoration and reconstruction work, digital technologies have already proven helpful, while as a means for preserving film they have been little tested to date.

As increasing numbers of new films intended to be archived for the future are now produced or supplied on digital formats, an additional problem has arisen, i.e. the archiving and maintenance of digital inventories.

At least for films on digital media, their digital storage on hard disks could be a solution and here potential even exists to tap into a new source of income on the basis of video-on-demand.

Cinema

The prevailing trend since the 1970s of no longer screening short films in the commercial cinemas has shown no sign of abating; rather it is intensifying. Among the reasons for decreases in the screening of shorts are the short film screening fees which cannot be priced into the admission tickets, the additional expenditure for the projectionist and especially the lack of screening time due to the fact that the lengths of feature films are increasing.

However the cinema operators surveyed are of the opinion that there is major audience interest in short films. They are convinced that the screening of short films can contribute to a specific, advantageous profile for their cinemas.

In terms of the short film categories, the cinema operators have no clear preferences. For them it is important that the pre-film short fits to the main feature film. Like in the past however the short fiction film remains the most popular short film form in the cinemas and one which can be well utilised in all kinds of cinemas, followed by short animation films.

An important platform for short films longer in length, documentary shorts, short art films and short film rolls are the non-commercial cultural cinema houses - the Kommunale Kinos - especially.

For those commercial cinemas which can afford to screen short films, important incentives are such promotional measures as the programme premium of the German Federal Office for Culture and Media.

Festivals

The importance of festivals is greater for short film than for any other film area. A German short film is submitted to an average of 15 national and 15 international festivals. In accordance with surveys, more than 90% of producers estimate the function of festivals as important while the majority even regard them as extremely important. For most filmmakers, short film festivals represent the only opportunity they have to present their films to an audience.

At present there are about 90 festivals in Germany which screen short films. The festival landscape is as heterogeneous as the short film field itself. The audience numbers are between 200 at the smallest festivals which usually only cover a few screenings and 20,000 at festivals extending over a number of days and with several programme levels and cinema auditoriums. Overall in the 2004 year surveyed, more than 180,000 audience members visited those festivals polled, from which one may assume that all the German festivals together have more than 300,000 audience members per year.

The amounts of funding available for short film festivals are between €5,000 and over €1 million. However just under half of the short film festivals surveyed organise and run their festivals on less than €25,000. In this regard the most important sources of finance are the local municipalities and the German federal states. One aspect of overriding importance is that festivals can only cover their ongoing staffing and infrastructure costs by means of institutional funding, while sponsors or project driven support as a rule want the organisers to fix certain festival themes which in turn determines or restricts the festival concept respectively.

Securing the finance for staffing and their office structure is the central issue for German short film festivals. The forecast cuts in cultural funding at municipal and German federal state levels will have a hard impact on short films as such cuts put their most important public platforms in danger.

The services the festivals undertake in publicly disseminating short films to a wider audience are considerable. With their publications and specialist events, not only do they make a contribution to the aesthetic, professional and economic development of short film, they also achieve broader public interest.

As discussion forums, market places or locations of self understanding at which aesthetic developments rub off each other and not least as screening locations, festivals are the most important platform for the industry and the short film scene in Germany.

Television

Both in terms of production and the purchase of short film licences for TV broadcasting purposes, the importance of television for the German short film market is very minimal. Per year approx. 30 films are co-produced and about 120 films are purchased in Germany. Of those purchased, German films account for about 40 films per year.

Consequently, short films are seldom included in television programming. Short films are not broadcast on the two main German public broadcasters of ARD and ZDF, nor on all the private commercial channels. In addition to the 3sat and ARTE public channels and the pay-TV channel 13TH STREET, short films are only broadcast on the ARD public broadcaster's third channel.

In the TV world, short film is regarded as a format for a niche audience and is usually broadcast at unattractive broadcast times. One praiseworthy exception in this regard is 3sat.

The most important platform for short films in the German language broadcast territory is the „Kurz-Schluss“ magazine programme on the German-French ARTE cultural TV channel.

One reason for the minimal presence of short film on television is the lack of staff available to intensively deal with and handle the amount of short films on offer. The huge range of 2,000 films produced each year in Germany alone, a non-transparent structure and major fluctuations in terms of producers and filmmakers are all regarded as hindrances.

Internet

The internet has opened up numerous new forms of distribution from which short film has also profited. In particular the internet has made a contribution to popularising short films. Short films are being utilised more and more frequently on portals specially dedicated to short film as well as on the production companies' and filmmakers' own Web sites. Likewise, institutes and companies like to show shorts on their homepages, most of which have been produced in the context of competitions or for advertising purposes. In this manner users can now choose between a large number of short films of varying categories and lengths which demonstrate significant differences in terms of their artistic and aesthetic aspirations.

However many short films which enjoy success at festivals are not available for internet exploitation due to various reservations: Significant scepticism exists on the part of many filmmakers and owners of rights as to the suitability of a computer screen for presenting their work.

To date, the pure presentation of short films on the internet has been a loss-making business. The reason for this is that users are very seldom prepared to pay for short film on the internet. When the study was being conducted, short films offers could only be cross-financed by means of support from other profitable business areas, such as for instance the licensing of „mobile content“.

Digitisation

The introduction of digital technology has also led to many changes for short film. By now all areas are affected, from production through to distribution. Thanks to short film filmmakers' high willingness to be innovative and experiment, short film made a significant contribution to digitisation during its initial phase.

Today digital technologies are not only utilised in production and postproduction, but also in sales and film projection. Short film has participated in the development and usage of all digital production, storage and delivery facilities.

In this regard short film has been the most important pioneering format and frequently the only content on innovative pre-platforms. One of the latest developments is now the demand for short films as „mobile content“ for video offers on mobile phone networks and internet protocol television (IPTV).

As soon as a new format has been successfully introduced to the market and the technical hurdles (such as bandwidth and quality) overcome, short films usually then take a back seat. In each case however, the know-how from makers of shorts is initially requested and this repeatedly gives the production of short films a boost as no one knows better than the makers of shorts how short drama functions.

Final Remarks

The German short film field is heterogeneous and diverse. Neither the typical short film nor the typical maker of short films is identifiable as such. The most diverse range of short film forms and directions which exist parallel to each other and/or are interwoven is equally reflected in the numerous distribution channels, forms of presentation and film scenes. And this is a situation to which the film industry, film experts and academics, as well as critical voices and political forces must adapt themselves. Otherwise, the presentation, evaluation and promotion of short film will each only be reproduced from their own „tunnel vision“ perspective.

If each partial area is examined individually, such as for instance short film in the cinemas, on television or in the art field, then it seems that short film only plays a minor role. The sum of all these partial areas together however results in a different, far more powerful picture.

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