

Short-form films: Advantages and challenges

Models and practices of Bulgarian short features

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Immediately following the political change of 1989, Bulgarian filmmaking became a shadow of its former self of the days of its golden age. Consequently, the rest of the arts, cheaper to practice, less centralised and respectively, more produceable, put it in the shade. Thus, alternative forms, such as shorts, omnibus, independent, experimental films and art projects, hybrids of various film types and video, performance and avant-garde carved out a niche within the film industry.

This book delves into the variety of short feature films, which are not that attractive and ambitious and oftentimes unequal as a result. They fall off the radar of audiences and media hype. Still, there are two intentions rendering them attractive: first, eagerness for endeavour combined with the right to make mistakes; second, a desire to be different, coupled with the right to stand equal.

The structure of the study seeks to cover the established in Bulgaria models and practices of *short feature films*, without claiming to be exhaustive (as research on the subject is building on concurrently with the writing of this text), but also without leaving out any main aspects, core problems and examples. The work specifies the terminology, the types and the subtypes of short film, its historical development, practical role and importance, the course of the production-distribution-exhibition process, its media coverage and aesthetic outcome.

The study deals with Bulgarian feature shorts up to 30' in length as well as up to 60', as the standards vary. These films are placed in the general context of the world film industry, inasmuch as it helps to rethink the domestic production. These can be film novels, omnibuses, book-to-film adaptations, experiments, supported by the National Film Center, TV broadcasters, public funds, universities, non-governmental foundations and/or private sponsors. Their vast variety supposes an attempt at classification and systematisation.

The chronological framework covers the period between the 1989 upheaval, drawing on and dealing in a special chapter with the whole range of films, released well until the time when the study went to press in the mid-2019. So, it may safely be said to be a work-in-progress.

The methodological basis is interdisciplinary: from treating short film as a socio-cultural phenomenon, to cultural policies, film theory and history, to a relevant critical reflection and PR strategies. The first part deals with defining and rearranging the terms related to the subject using film theory, philosophy, art studies and culturology. The second part draws on sociology, economics, media studies, the theory of perception and social sciences. The approach in the third part is historical and that in the fourth part is critical and analytical. The films are analysed both as 'artworks' and social media creating values and shaping mindsets and behaviours.

The study seeks to cover short feature film as a film subtype, tracing its intersections with independent, experimental, alternative, hybrid film, detecting the admixtures of practices and placing it as a development over time; and finally, drawing conclusions about its aesthetic output.

The choice of the subject is in itself indicative: the vast amounts of Bulgarian short feature films have not yet been explored and systematised in a fundamental study. The very collection of empirical material – the

films mentioned herein – is already one of the achievements of the study, as information about them is sketchy and insufficient.

I believe that the book's assumption, which permeates every chapter and every analysis, is also contributive. To summarise, the book argues that though short feature film has potential and a means to become an alternative to full-length, the result is ambivalent. Being independent and privately made, short feature film is successful as an alternative within the production-distribution-exhibition triangle. Short feature film uses to a greater extent the opportunities afforded by the new technologies. It is a really great advantage that explains its rise, especially powerful over the last decade.

Unfortunately though, short feature film (with a few exceptions) fails to be radical in its aesthetic pursuits and to become an experimental and avant-garde alternative. It is used more often than not as a suitable steppingstone to the 'world of the greats', as paving the way to a feature-length debut, rather than striving to talk about unusual things in a innovative manner bursting what has become to grow threadbare. It seems to be a matter of growing up: while young, filmmakers, though not expressing themselves that skilfully, sometimes hit upon original things. Once trained and given the opportunity to express themselves in the standard way, most of them try to become part of the established system, turning their back on the 'innovative thinking', which is otherwise much in demand. After all, the authors of short forms are striving to be different enough to stand out, but not so radical as to face the risk of being rejected by the system.

A pessimistic-optimistic end: Bulgarian short feature film hardly ever succeeds in enriching the cinematic language and further developing author's forms.

But then again, they do categorically enrich and diversify the practices of making, exhibiting, distributing and the overall functioning of the film processes.