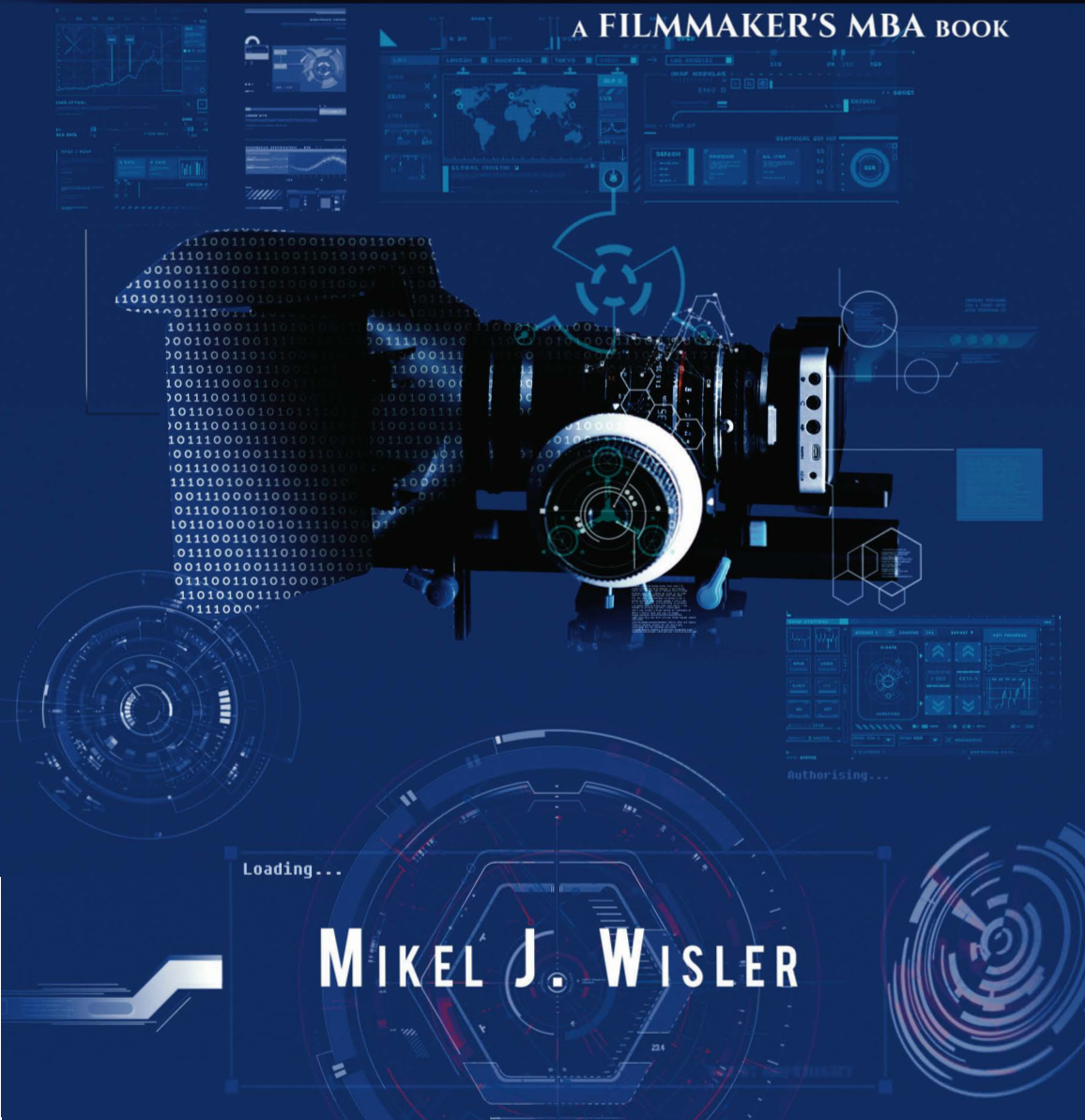




# SHORT FILMS 2.0

## GETTING NOTICED IN THE YOUTUBE AGE

A FILMMAKER'S MBA BOOK



MIKEL J. WISLER



# **SHORT FILMS 2.0**

## **GETTING NOTICED IN THE YOUTUBE AGE**

**BY**

**MIKEL J. WISLER**

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**Doxa**NOÛS  
M E D I A

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## **PRAISE FOR MIKEL J. WISLER'S SHORT FILMS:**

"Parallel" is a beautiful cinematic tone poem that fiercely champions the idea of everlasting love. It's a stunning achievement in romantic sci-fi.

- Philip Smolen's review of "Parallel"  
Rogue Cinema

"Parallel" has a feature film's worth of story it tells in 11 minutes. That may make it sound convoluted, but it's a very clear-eyed story, with emotional journeys experienced that would normally take two hours, but here are followed, easily and un-rushed, in minutes. ... it's quite an experience on not just it's main character, but the viewer, as well.

- Brian Skutle's review of "Parallel"  
Sonic-Cinema.com

Wisler and company deliver a thinking person's short film that taps into some pretty primitive areas, including what it means to exist in the field of time, what it means to live, to love and lose and finally to die. It's serious, it's smart, it's even a bit of a tear jerker.

- Nicholas La Salla's review of "Parallel"  
Forest City Short Film Review

[Playing with Ice] is a wonderful and satisfying short that speaks volumes about what we hold inside and the damage it causes. Wisler has made a life-affirming and nifty pseudo sci-fi movie all at the same time. Bravo!

- Philip Smolen's review of "Playing with Ice"  
Rogue Cinema

... the execution is flawless... do yourself a favor, watch the thing twice, back to back—only the second time will show how spot-on the performances really are!

- Mike Haberfelner's review of "Intrigue"  
[(re)Search my Trash]



ALSO WRITTEN BY MIKEL J. WISLER

# UNIDENTIFIED



One year ago, a boy mysteriously went missing after claiming to have been abducted by extraterrestrial beings multiple times. No trace of him has ever been found.

Now, Boston-based Special Agent for the FBI, Nicole Mitchell, is brought back from administrative leave when a girl in the same New Hampshire town also claims to have been abducted. The girl's story bears eerie similarities to the case of the missing boy Mitchell investigated the year before.

Certain that someone is using the powerful suggestion of UFOs and the alien abduction scenario to kidnap these kids, Mitchell enlists the help of paranormal debunking psychiatrist, Dr. Alan Evans. But, who among the locals knows the truth? Is it the girl's parents? The peculiar new pastor in town? The local police? As the case unfolds, Mitchell and Evans are confronted with a much darker and far more sinister reality than they ever expected. Nothing could have prepared them for what they are about to encounter.

***"Unidentified is full of spookiness and reversals and surprises and fun. I can't wait for the movie."***

- Dave Schmelzer (Editor-in-chief: [hellohoratio.com](http://hellohoratio.com))





**FOR ANDREW GILBERT**



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I have been making short films for years and as a result there are so many people that should be thanked for their help and influence in my development as a filmmaker and storyteller. Every cast and crew I've worked with has taught me so much! Thank you to all of these people, though I dare not name everyone here as the list would be a book all its own.

Thank you to my wife, Danae, who has supported my crazy endeavors for a very long time! I must thank my early short filmmaking partners: Andrew Gilbert, Scott Peercy, Jeremiah Hawn, Ben Bowers, Chris Evans, and Andrew Shaw with whom I made so many fun and early projects along with a lot of mistakes and missteps that taught me so much. Thank you to the Los Angeles Film Studies Center for the invaluable lessons and hands-on experience.

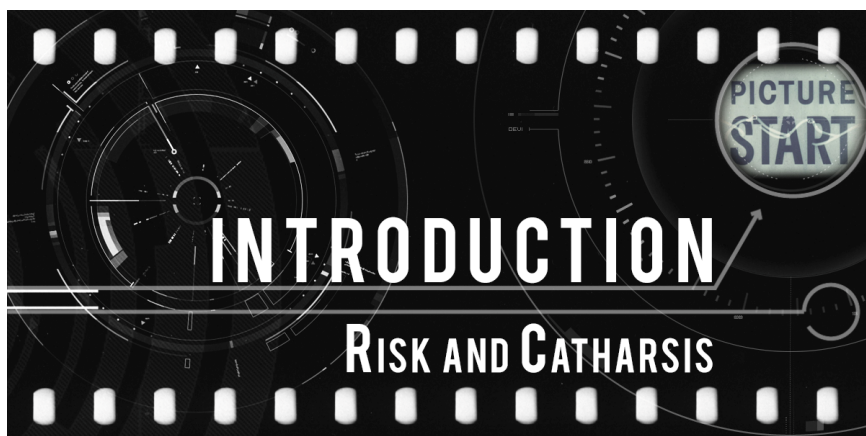
Thank you to Stories by the River and Kristina and Dominic Stone Kaiser for engaging directly in the act of making short films and seeing their value as a medium for exploring life's meaning. My many thanks to Trevor Duke, who gave feedback on an early draft of this manuscript, and for being a fantastic partner in short filmmaking. Thanks to Eric Bumpus for his continued encouragement and enthusiasm for this particular book as well as my short films and for helping significantly with the editing process. Thank you to Béckie Rankin for the insightful editing and feedback on this manuscript and for furthering the dialogue about short filmmaking by inviting me to speak to her high school students.

I must specifically thank Randy Zella Varaguas. This whole book first started out as a very simple outline for a short talk she

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

asked me to give at an event she organized at the Hull Film Office. After giving that talk, I got to thinking that the information I covered might be of value to a lot more people than I initially thought.

Finally, even though he's no longer with us, I sincerely must thank my grandpa, Bob Wisler, for allowing the very young and energetic kid I was so many years ago to constantly borrow his video camera and run off into the woods or down the road or into the creek to try my hand at creating something resembling motion pictures. In the process I took my first early and shaky steps in visual storytelling.



We live in an extremely fast-paced and media-saturated world. So, how can new and aspiring filmmakers stand out? Over the last decade of making short films, I have asked myself this question often. It has been an amazing time to make shorts for many reasons. In particular, my work making short films coincided with the first ten years of YouTube, which has proven to be a unique period of time for new filmmakers. The world of short filmmaking and distribution has been under rapid change for several years. Trying to make sense of all these changes and how to take advantage of new opportunities can be challenging. In preparing to give a talk a while back at the Hull Film Office about making short films, I outlined what I felt has happened in recent years to the medium and how new filmmakers can make the most of these changes. As I looked around at various books after the presentation, I realized that there seems to be little material covering the recent evolution of short films in a comprehensive way. So, if you're ready to dive into making a short film in this new age of online media, grab a coffee and let's get busy exploring how you can set yourself up for success by embracing change and dispelling some outdated ideas!

Before we get into the nitty-gritty details, though, I think it might be helpful to stop and ask a bigger question first: Why make short films?

In the world of movies, feature-length films dominate the cultural focus and the financial viability of creating a film that can be sold for a profit to a distributor remains exclusive to feature films. As I write this, I am in development for my first feature film, but long before I decided to take on a feature film, I made and continue to make short films. Why?

One clear argument often made for why aspiring filmmakers should value starting off their career by making short films is that they will learn through experience and become far more prepared for the task of making a feature film. This is quite true. In the words of Michael Rabiger, "short films still require their makers to conquer the full range of production, authorship, and stylistic problems—but in a small compass and small cost."<sup>1</sup> I've seen—even worked with—filmmakers whose first feature films faced many challenges due to the inexperience of the director. I am convinced that many such issues could have been avoided had they taken the time to make a few short films first.

However, there is so much more to short films than just learning the filmmaking craft! For a while I felt I was done with short films and that my time would be better spent focusing exclusively on how to get a feature film funded. One major development in my life changed all of that.

The following story is probably rather odd-sounding, but please hear me out. In 2010, I got involved with a small and unconventional start-up church. I know. It's true. I'm one of

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<sup>1</sup> *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics* by Michael Rabiger, 1997, Focal Press. Page 6.



those goofballs that actually goes to church (and rather likes it, no less). But you see, this church is not quite like any other place I've been. The River Church, in Quincy, Massachusetts, is a rather unique place. There, for the first time in my life, rather than feeling like my passion for the arts pitted me against my faith community, I find it to be embraced and sought out. For example, I began running The River Film Forum, a monthly event designed around watching movies with people from all walks of life and engaging in meaningful conversations about what such stories have to offer us in terms of examining life. Here is a community of people genuinely interested in hearing diverse stories and various perspectives as each of us journeys through life together.

In fact, movies became such an important part of what we do as a faith community, that even as part of our Sunday morning worship service we started occasionally using short films as the central piece of the day's talk. By focusing on the shared experience of a brief story, we discovered something unique and amazing: short films can allow us to dive right into some of the deepest and darkest areas of the human heart and mind in a matter of minutes. And the conversations that ensue are unlike any other conversations I've encountered in my life-long journey of faith!

So when Kristina Stone Kaiser, my pastor, asked me if we could possibly make short films that offered both opportunities for local filmmakers to gain experience and give us stories that could spark meaningful conversations, it was the start of an exciting new adventure. In 2012, we created Stories by the River (SbtR).<sup>2</sup> Now I know what you're probably thinking. It's probably something along the lines of, "Oh God, no! A church making short

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.StoriesByTheRiver.org](http://www.StoriesByTheRiver.org) for more information.

films! Ugh!” Let me put your mind at ease by expressing with all honesty that I am pretty sure no one in the world hates the agenda-driven drivel that is the majority of faith-based movies more than me.<sup>3</sup> Making “those kinds” of films is not at all our objective! In fact, many of the people we work with in making short films come from diverse perspectives and backgrounds. And, rather than push a specific agenda, we prefer to present stories and ask questions about life. After all, propaganda seeks only to push an agenda, but good art is less didactic, and genuinely wrestles with life. We are interested in the latter.

When done well, short films offer us an opportunity to explore life together with ample time for conversation. A short film that might only last ten or twenty or thirty minutes is a brief moment where you and I can share the experience of a story that offers us common ground for real conversations about things we might not otherwise normally talk about. And, what I love about short films specifically is that, unlike a feature film, there’s no room for distractions. We have to dive quickly into the characters and expose the central problem they are facing in this moment. There’s a fine art to a well-crafted short film as we seek to draw in the audience and give them just enough information so the story naturally slips forward with a sense of inevitability. Good short film scripts are lean and focused!

As a filmmaker, I can also take risks with short films, which I might never have been able to with a feature film due to the many financial concerns involved with making a feature. The first film I directed for Stories by the River was “A Silent Universe”,<sup>4</sup> a non-

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<sup>3</sup> I apologize to those who feel excited about overtly Christian movies that are, in my opinion, strong on message and short on everything else. I believe that we can do far better!

<sup>4</sup> Produced in 2012, available at [www.StoriesByTheRiver.org](http://www.StoriesByTheRiver.org).

traditional science fiction film that uses the scenario of an alien invasion as a means to trap our two characters, brothers at odds, in an old garage and force them to navigate some of life's toughest questions (which even I'd rather avoid on most days, if I'm being honest). In the face of what seems to be the complete absence of hope, can these two brothers find a reason to go on? Is doubt and despair the only appropriate response when confronted with an ugly and violent world?

In 2013, I took a personal risk with a short film I directed for Stories by the River. I chose to tell a story that is quite important to me, but also stands well outside the perspectives of many people I dearly love, even as we disagree on this important issue. The short film "Playing with Ice" tells the story of a gay young woman who interviews to become part of an aggressive scientific experiment because she feels rejected and alone after being cast off by her family due to her sexual orientation. For twenty minutes we get to dive into Jocelyn's pain at being deeply wounded. What's more, we learn that she's not the only one who has been profoundly hurt by fear and misguided ideas. Emma, the woman interviewing Jocelyn, drops her guard and reveals her own painful story. Is avoidance or denial the answer for these characters in light of the unfair and unloving treatment they have been given? Or, can they find acceptance and love right here and now? The film is brief: a high-pressure situation and an amazingly challenging story to tell. It really stretched me as a filmmaker. It's also one of the stories I'm most proud of being able to help bring to life. It has gone on to play at several festivals, including one of the top LGBT festivals in France.

By helping to launch and run Stories by the River, I have learned that short films need not serve exclusively as proof I know

filmmaking technique well enough to be trusted to make a functional feature film. I do hope my experience in making short films will help instill confidence in my eventual partners in making feature films, but what if I never get the opportunity to make a feature film? Have I wasted my time making short films? I don't think so! If there's one thing that I really want to get across, it is that when I set out to tell a story—short, feature, or novel—it comes from that central and secret place deep inside my heart that desperately cries out for meaning and love, for understanding and connection. Now, this doesn't mean I only make serious movies, as I find comedy often provides great insight into some of our deepest hurts and biggest longings. In fact, one of my most recent films is a very short comedy I wrote and directed for Stories by the River called "Intrigue."<sup>5</sup>

So, why do I make short films? I make short films because they allow me to wrestle with life! They allow me the freedom to take risks that I might otherwise never be able to take on larger projects. These risks help me grow as an artist and can be personally quite fulfilling. Short films force me to be a better storyteller. There is no room for digressions and distractions. Often times, I have to know the characters I'm creating in just as great a depth as the ones I've created for various feature film scripts I've written. Why? Because I'm only giving you a tiny glimpse of these characters. But, in these precious few minutes during which you have hopefully given my humble film your attention, I hope you sense in these characters (and in the storyteller behind them) kindred spirits in this journey through life as we all, in our own way, seek to understand and be understood; as we all are lonely, but hopefully not alone.

---

<sup>5</sup> Produced in 2015, available at [www.StoriesByTheRiver.org](http://www.StoriesByTheRiver.org).

These are stories that sometimes form slowly and other times they spring into my mind nearly fully formed, as was the case with my 2015 *Stories by the River* short film, “Parallel.”<sup>6</sup> And, over the course of time—through each draft; through conversations with my cinematographer and producers; through rehearsals with the cast; through the shooting and editing process—they prove themselves to be stories that demand to be told. As a filmmaker, I simply hope to get out of the way and allow it to happen, releasing these stories into the great unknown of our digital age in hopes that even if I never hear about it, someone somewhere out there has a moment of profound and real catharsis that inspires them—even in some small way—to look at life with new eyes, with a fresh perspective.

That is why I continue to make and love short films. I have dedicated a large amount of my time to understanding how short films work and how they differ from feature films. In fact, I was recently asked to be part of the judging panel for Digi60 Filmmakers’ Festival, which focuses on challenging filmmakers to tell a story in two-and-a-half-minutes. The more I learn about how short films are changing today, the more I believe in sharing such information from my years of studying and making short films. That is why I have chosen to write this book: as a means to help other filmmakers explore the amazing and ever evolving medium of short films. One thing has become abundantly clear to me: the very nature of short films has dramatically and fundamentally changed over the last decade. With my experiences as a filmmaker, as a producer and distributor with *Stories by the River*, and as a festival judge for SbtR and Digi60, I have come to understand that much is changing quickly in terms of how short

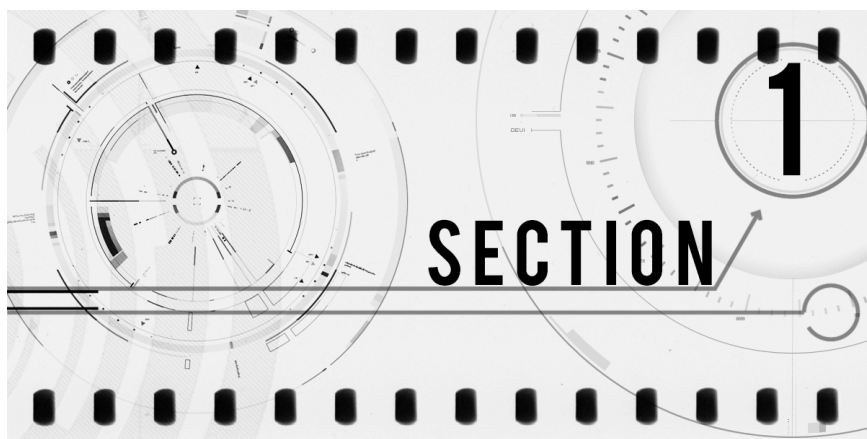
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<sup>6</sup> Available at [www.StoriesByTheRiver.org](http://www.StoriesByTheRiver.org).

films are made, how short they are, what they accomplish, and how they reach their intended audience. Innovations and changes to the medium will continue in the coming decades. With this in mind, my goal with this book is to launch a helpful dialogue about the evolution of short films that will equip new filmmakers with vital knowledge to dive into this exciting medium with confidence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Most of this introduction first appeared as a blog entry I was invited to guest write for [www.iloveshortfilms.com](http://www.iloveshortfilms.com) in 2014.

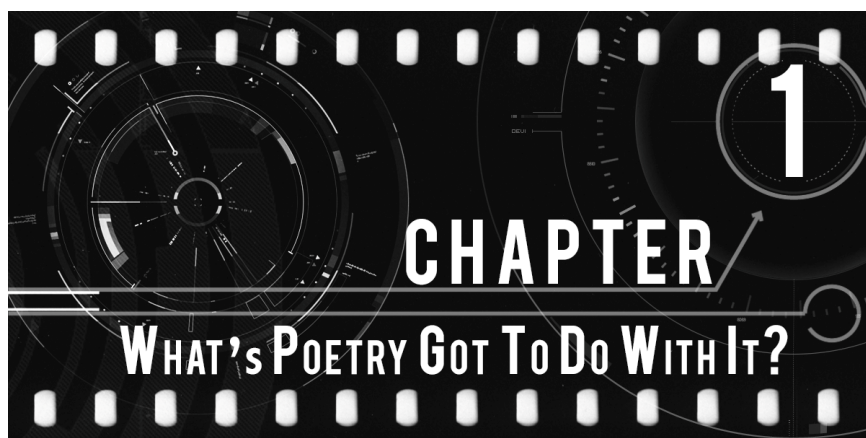


# **UNDERSTANDING SHORT FILMS IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

**WHAT THEY WERE, WHAT THEY ARE, AND WHAT THEY ARE BECOMING.**





The title card features a black background with a white film strip border. In the upper right, a large white number '1' is enclosed in a circular frame. Below it, the word 'CHAPTER' is written in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. At the bottom, the title 'WHAT'S POETRY GOT TO DO WITH IT?' is displayed in a similar bold, white sans-serif font. The background is decorated with faint, semi-transparent images of camera dials and film reels.

# CHAPTER 1

## WHAT'S POETRY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

When I first started out as a filmmaker, I thought of short films as a means to prove I had what it takes to make feature films. To some degree, this is a good reason to get started with shorts. In fact, this may well be your reason. There's nothing wrong with using shorts as a starting ground: to prove you have the skills to make feature films. However, the process to prove those skills is not quite the same as when I started out. I want to share a little of my story with you so you can see how I've come to my current perspective on short films. Hopefully, you can then learn from my mistakes and be better equipped to dive into the current short film market with something that stands out.

While attending the Los Angeles Film Studies Center (LAFSC) during the spring of 2003, I had to make several projects that ranged from thirty seconds to three minutes. All of these projects were silent films. We had the option to shoot either on MiniDV or on Super8 film. I opted to shoot everything on Super8 as I knew the limited running time of the film stock would force me to plan thoroughly. I also knew that this was likely the only time in my life I would have the opportunity to shoot on film, and thus learn to deal with the unique challenges of lighting and properly

exposing celluloid.<sup>8</sup>

Later, while I was still in college, I made a short film that ran thirty-six minutes. Following college, I made two short films: my first films in HD. The second of those films was a short called “Cellar Door,” a psychological thriller that ran thirty-seven minutes. It was the first of my early films that made it into festivals and even won a small completion grant.<sup>9</sup> Following that, I made a thirty-minute psychological thriller. It got into several festivals and won an award at a notable festival in Philadelphia for its screenplay.<sup>10</sup> These early short films were truly miniature feature films. They had distinct three act structures as one might expect to see in a two-hour movie.

I continued making short films with this concept in mind. But, I also continued to cut back on the length of scripts. After all, it took five long consecutive days to shoot “Cellar Door” and two long weekends to shoot “Cold October.” Andrew Gilbert, my fellow writer and producer, and I were making these shorts with incredibly limited resources that we managed to cobble together ourselves. One thing became clear: shooting needed to be quicker! We could not sustain the cost in money and time required to shoot such long short films. Thus began my personal development in seeing the great value of brevity in short films.

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<sup>8</sup> So far, that has remained the case. I have yet to shoot more projects on celluloid. And, with the advancement of digital technology, it seems less likely I will in the future.

<sup>9</sup> “Cellar Door” was awarded the 2007 Cinephile Film Arts Grant, in Bloomington, Indiana.

<sup>10</sup> “Cold October,” co-written by Andrew Gilbert & Mikel J. Wisler, directed by Wisler, winner of Best Screenplay at the 2009 Terror Film Festival in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

## **BREVITY, FOCUS, AND DISCIPLINE**

Looking at short films today, it is clear to me that shorts require an even greater amount of focus and discipline upon the part of the storytellers making them.<sup>11</sup> While a feature film can get away with a weak moment, or a scene that maybe drags just a little, or an awkward bit of cutting or dialogue that is forgotten an hour later when the credits roll, a short film does not have this luxury; audiences poise themselves differently for a shorter film and are able to take in and remember so much more. In a very real sense, the filmmaking in short films is far more naked and visible than in feature films. A tiny flaw in a short film represents such a significant portion of the whole project.

In other words, short films are at a disadvantage as a filmmaker's skills are quite exposed. This is both an intimidating and exhilarating aspect of short filmmaking. As a filmmaker, you are quite vulnerable, but you are also ideally poised to learn from mistakes. Where a feature film audience might not dive into the nitty-gritty of what really worked and didn't work about the pacing of the editing, shot choice, camera movement, or dialogue writing, a short film's brevity does not allow the audience to slip into its usual movie-watching mode.<sup>12</sup> The result of this difference is that audiences are more sensitive to the mechanics of filmmaking. On the one hand, this can be daunting to new filmmakers (though most are naive enough to not worry about this, and that's a good and necessary thing), but on the other hand, this nakedness of the short filmmaking process allows for

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<sup>11</sup> In Chapter Two, I explore how this evolution happened and why brevity has become the key to effective short filmmaking.

<sup>12</sup> In Chapter Three, I address how short films are experienced and why this further exposes short films to critical scrutiny.

## WHAT'S POETRY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

greater growth in new filmmakers willing to endure critical feedback on early projects. This is definitely how I learned!

Another factor that separates feature films and shorts is the need in longer films for subplots. With most feature films, there are multiple characters that are often experiencing their own journeys of discovery and transformation, and thus they get some attention, and their storylines have to be addressed and resolved as they intersect with the main story. Subplots make for a strong feature film, but they generally take away from short films. By and large, they just slow a short film down and cause the movie to overstay its welcome. The good news is when writing a short film script there is no need to develop subplots. The challenge, however, is that good short films must remain impeccably focused. Linda J. Cowgill draws the following comparison from another form of storytelling, “Just as the short story writer envies the novelist’s freedom to leisurely establish mood and story, the short film writer has a difficult job in structuring his story so that the characters, theme and plot all prove satisfying in a shorter framework.”<sup>13</sup>

This is what I mean when I say that short films require a greater level of focus and discipline. As storytellers seeking to make a short film, you and I do not have the luxuries of greater time and space that often accompany feature films (or novels). Not to mention, most short films are made with minimal or no budget at all, a limitation that adds challenges and possibilities.<sup>14</sup> This does not mean that there isn’t a great level of focus and discipline required when making an effective feature film. I assure

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<sup>13</sup> *Writing Short Films* by Linda J. Cowgill, Watson-Guptill Publications, 2005. Page xiv.

<sup>14</sup> In Chapter Four, I discuss how to embrace making short films on a limited budget.

you there is, but the constraints on a short film impose unique requirements on filmmakers, especially today!

I was once hired to be the final polishing editor on a feature film. It was a good film, but it lagged at points. It was not the best version of the story when I came aboard. By the end of the process, through conversations with the director and producer and a lot of loving and painstaking work, we had cut out nearly thirty minutes of the film. In fact, I'd completely deleted a character from the story. As it turned out, we came to recognize that this particular character added nothing to the progression of the plot or the central conflict of the story. The information we learned in scenes between this supporting character and the main character either was repeated elsewhere or did not have a profound enough impact on the story to be missed when it was simply taken away. The end result of this editing process was that we arrived at a much stronger version of the film that moved with purpose and momentum. In other words, we crafted a far more watchable movie.

The other end result of this experience was that it taught me so much as a writer about what does and doesn't work once you get to the editing room. This is true whether I am working on a feature or short screenplay. I had read the script for the above feature before the film had gone into production. I served as the film's assistant director, so I was intimately acquainted with every moment of production. I liked the script, but I was also younger and not quite as experienced in those days. Seeing first hand just how much could be—in fact, needed to be—cut out of the film to make it an engaging experience for audiences has forever changed how I read scripts today. It has also fundamentally changed how I write scripts!

## WHAT'S POETRY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

So, yes, great discipline is required when writing a feature film script, but allow me to propose a theory. I believe, as far as literary forms of storytelling, feature films have more in common with short stories than they do with novels. Novels take hours to read, can often include several main characters, can span large amounts of time and space, and can ultimately be quite a cerebral experience. Short stories, on the other hand, tend to focus on fewer characters, on singular events, and often drop us right into the middle of an emotive experience. Because of these things, I often find that films adapted from short stories tend to flow better than films adapted from novels. In the case of Phillip K. Dick's short story, "Minority Report," the film version actually expands on some of the ideas in the original short story. Meanwhile, whole characters have to be excluded from adaptations of many novels.<sup>15</sup>

I bring all of this up to make this point: If feature films are more like short stories in nature, that must mean most short films are in fact closer to flash fiction, or possibly poetry. Consider these words from filmmaker and writer Michael Rabiger:

Regrettably the short film subject is often considered beneath the director with serious intentions. This is like would-be novelists rejecting poetry and the short story as unworthy mediums. The short film is actually closest to the poetic form, for it requires deft characterization, a compressed narrative style, and something to say that is focused and fresh in voice. A good five- to ten-minute film

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<sup>15</sup> Tom Bombadil is excluded from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films, which ultimately makes the most sense given the nature and scope of the movies compared to the books and their connection to the broader world and story that J.R.R. Tolkien was creating, in which Bombadil is a vital presence.

is actually more demanding to make than a passable thirty minute one.<sup>16</sup>

Rabiger makes no bones about it. Making a good short film is hard work. In fact, I might go as far as to suggest it's likely harder to make a good short film than it is to make a good feature film, which can be a pretty deflating thought, but hang in there. I think back on my own start in short films and it's no wonder I started out making films that came in well over thirty minutes in length. As Rabiger points out, it was just plain easier to write films that long. I had not yet developed enough discipline as a storyteller to pull off something shorter. Go figure. Yet somehow, new filmmakers are expected to start with short films instead of features. Obviously it is generally much cheaper to shoot a short film than a feature, but I would also suggest that precisely because of the greater level of difficulty in mastering effective storytelling within short films that new filmmakers must take on short films before embarking on feature films with all their inherent financial pressures.

So, what's a new filmmaker hoping to make a good short film to do?

## GO SHORTER

The name of the game is brevity! There is really no room for extraneous information and there is no time for lengthy exposition and mood setting. We must simply dive in. As Cowgill points out in her book *Writing Short Films*, "In a short film,

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<sup>16</sup> *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics* by Michael Rabiger, Focal Press, 1997. Page 211.

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gratuitous information is especially problematic; it will delay action and obscure information that is truly important.”<sup>17</sup>

It seems to me that there are two ways one can approach brevity: as a burdensome limitation or the very fuel for your creativity. Most feature films require multiple characters and numerous locations. Few features can effectively pull off single location stories. Even horror movies that might take place entirely in one haunted house generally need a rather large house so characters can move about, providing natural scene breaks and changes in environment to help keep audiences from becoming too restless.<sup>18</sup>

With a short film, on the other hand, having events unfold in a single location often makes perfect sense. This allows for ease in shooting since the crew doesn't have to tear down and set-up equipment in multiple sites, but it also represents an opportunity for the storyteller behind the film to truly focus on characters. A single well-selected and well-dressed location can be profoundly effective. A perfect example of this is the short film “Those Unattended,” by director Brian Garvey.<sup>19</sup> This sci-fi family drama unfolds in a single dinning room. Production design, lighting, and visual effects all help instantly drop us into this futuristic world. We never leave this one room during the six minutes of the film. But given the mind's natural propensity to fill in implied information beyond the edges of the frame, we effectively assume

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<sup>17</sup> *Writing Short Films* by Linda J. Cowgirl, Watson-Guption Publications, 2005. Page 113.

<sup>18</sup> A recent notable exception to this is the film *Buried*, directed by Rodrigo Cortés and starring Ryan Reynolds alone in a wooden box after his character has been buried alive by insurgents in the Middle East. Even this film doesn't risk overstaying its welcome and clocks in at 95-minutes.

<sup>19</sup> “Those Unattended”, written and directed by Brian Garvey, 2014. [www.briangarveyfilms.com](http://www.briangarveyfilms.com)



a very similar world exists in the rest of their house, their neighborhood, their city, and so forth. Garvey's film is a perfect example of the new wave of short films embracing brevity by honing in on characters' relationships within the confines of limited time and space. I highly recommend putting this book down for six minutes and hopping on to Garvey's website or Vimeo and watching "Those Unattended."

I have experimented with this singular location approach for a while. Even as far back as my first successful short film, "Cellar Door,"<sup>20</sup> I creatively utilized an apple orchard as a singular location (other than the opening credits sequence) by making it a character within the story. As I've mentioned before, however, that film was thirty-seven minutes and even though it was accepted into festivals at the time, as we will discuss in later chapters, that runtime is no longer a viable length for a short film today.

More recently, I have directed films like "Playing with Ice,"<sup>21</sup> which focuses on an interview for a strange scientific project. The interview probes into the difficult past of the main character within the context of this interview room. "Intrigue,"<sup>22</sup> is another short I wrote and directed that features two characters in a room. Even with a six-minute running time and confined to a single dinning room, the film effectively flips genres midway through for a fun twist. I have also served the producer and cinematographer for other projects that unfold in similar ways, such as "A Regular Haunt,"<sup>23</sup> which is a comedy about two roommates in a house that

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<sup>20</sup> "Cellar Door," directed by Mikel J. Wisler, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> "Playing with Ice," 2013. Available at [www.StoriesByTheRiver.org](http://www.StoriesByTheRiver.org).

<sup>22</sup> "Intrigue," 2015. Available at [www.StoriesByTheRiver.org](http://www.StoriesByTheRiver.org).

<sup>23</sup> "A Regular Haunt," written by Audrey Noone and directed by Christopher Grace, 2015. Available at [www.StoriesByTheRiver.org](http://www.StoriesByTheRiver.org).

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may be haunted, as events unfold in real time (less than five minutes, in fact).

While I have often used a single location as means to embrace brevity in my filmmaking, it is by no means the only method for making effective short films. The crucial idea is that whether your short film has one or many locations, be sure that your story is focused and free from any excess exposition or material that hinders the forward momentum of the story. Establishing a new location in a film that is only a few minutes long may be too much of a distraction.

The challenge with any such short film is finding the right premise and entrance into the story, but this challenge doesn't have to prove impossible. As more and more filmmakers are demonstrating, there seems to be no end for how to accomplish all of this and thus, tell a compelling story, even if we only see one location and the film lasts mere minutes.

## Go VISUAL

The other trend I have observed and experienced first hand is that a large number of successful short films these days are often very light on dialogue. Harkening back to the early days of cinema, many new filmmakers embrace the challenge of relying strictly on visuals to tell their story. This can be counterintuitive to new filmmakers raised on a steady diet of dialogue-heavy feature films and television. Dialogue is a wonderful tool, and if you look at the vast majority of the films I've written and directed, you'll notice I do enjoy working with dialogue. However, dialogue is also one of the hardest aspects of scriptwriting to master. It takes practice and lots of development. It can be easy for new filmmakers to be

lured into the trap of making an early project that relies exclusively on dialogue to tell its story. And, why not? All you need to do is point the camera at your actors and let them do the work, right? Then, you cut it together and you have a movie, right? That almost never goes well.

A few years ago, I attended two different film festivals, back to back, where I saw a feature film that embodied this faulty logic and lazy filmmaking. These two separate and unrelated features displayed the folly of attempting to rely exclusively on dialogue to tell a story.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, both of these films displayed a clear desire by the filmmakers to emulate the style of dialogue writing made famous by Kevin Smith.<sup>25</sup> Both films were excruciatingly boring visually—and in every other way imaginable—and felt flat given their derivative nature. One was even so horribly shot and edited that it was hard to believe it had been accepted to any festival. No thought had been given to the fact that movies are a visual medium. I can sincerely say those are roughly four hours of my life I desperately wish I could have back!

Making such mediocre films could have been avoided if the filmmakers had invested more time in embracing brevity and developing their skills in visual storytelling, which is another reason why I believe short films offer a great training ground for new filmmakers. Looking at the films that make a splash today, they are incredibly visual. I highly recommend checking out any of the short films nominated for Oscars™ each year. These are carefully shot and edited films that take seriously the visual nature of cinema. So much can be communicated within the

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<sup>24</sup> I won't mention the titles, but it wouldn't really matter, as both films have long faded into obscurity.

<sup>25</sup> Including *Clerks* (1994), *Mallrats* (1995), *Dogma* (1999), and *Red State* (2011).

frame that dialogue is often unnecessary for many of the new short films being made.

I experimented with this approach with my short film, "Stop."<sup>26</sup> The film remains my most successful short film to date both in terms of festival reception and plays on Vimeo and YouTube. I would attribute this in large part to its short running time (just over eight minutes) and nearly dialogue-free execution, after the opening scene. The film eventually grabbed the attention of an independent production company in Los Angeles. They contacted me to discuss the possibilities of developing the short film into a feature.

I do not mean to suggest that new short films need to be made exclusively sans dialogue, but I do think the challenge is one that is worth contemplating, if you are new to filmmaking and want to develop your visual and technical skills. Nonetheless, the undeniable reality is that audiences today are incredibly sophisticated. With increasingly accessible digital filmmaking technology, more polished and cinematic-looking short films are becoming readily available to viewers. As a result, even the expectations from the casual viewer of short films on YouTube are that short films will be visually compelling. No exceptions!

In the next chapter, I will look at how this trend developed so that we can better understand what factors influence the viewing of our short films. As you come to understand these factors, you will be better equipped to make films that grab the viewer's attention and keep it.

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<sup>26</sup> Written & directed by Wisler, 2011. Available at [www.mikelwisler.com](http://www.mikelwisler.com).



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Stories by the River is the non-profit film production and distribution arm of The River South Center in Quincy, Massachusetts. Launched in 2012, Stories by the River co-produces short films with new filmmakers interested in telling stories that explore the human condition, wrestle with life's big questions, and provide audiences with opportunities for reflection and discussion.

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**DOXA:** Doxa (from ancient Greek "glory", "praise", "to appear", "to seem", "to think" and "to accept") is a Greek word meaning common belief or popular opinion.  
-- A Greek-English Lexicon

**NOÛS:** Noûs (from Greek philosophy) is a Greek word meaning mind or intellect.  
-- Random House  
Kernerman  
Webster's College Dictionary

### MEDIA:

A substance that makes possible the transfer of energy from one location to another, especially through waves. -- The American Heritage Science Dictionary

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End of sample

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Short Films 2.0: Getting Noticed in the YouTube Age  
Mikel J. Wisler

The digital age has dramatically changed the purpose and nature of short films. Since 2005, YouTube has provided short video content to people around the world and, in the process, has forever altered how we watch and make short films. As a result, both new and seasoned filmmakers are seizing fresh opportunities to reach audiences. Short Films 2.0 explores how short filmmaking has adapted to the online world, why these changes have occurred, and how filmmakers can go about creating new short films that engage audiences. Mikel J. Wisler draws from over a decade of experience directing, writing, and producing award-winning short films in order to shine a light on the evolution of short films and their new structure in the digital age. Drawing on science, philosophy, and real world examples, this book explores the impact that the digital age has had on short film length, plot structure, audience expectations, film festival reception, and more.

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Filmmaking / Business: Marketing, Economics

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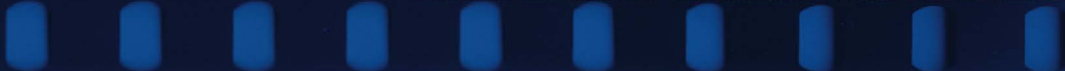


Photo by Bryant Naro.

MIKEL J. WISLER is an award-winning filmmaker and writer who has written, produced, and directed several short films that have played at festivals domestically and abroad, receiving nominations, awards, and international distribution. In 2012, he became a co-founder of Stories by the River, a non-profit film production and distribution company. Wisler also conducts the monthly River Film Forum events focused on the exploration of life's meaning through cinema. Born in Brazil, South America, where he spent most of his childhood, Wisler now lives on the south shore of Boston, Massachusetts, with his wife, daughter, and dog.

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