

## The Short Film - A Symposium

👤 Various 🕒 June 2001 📁 Feature Articles 📖 Issue 14

**Compiled by Fiona A. Villella**

Contrary to the widely held view that the short film is merely a stepping-stone or an opportunity to play with the medium before embarking on what is regarded as the format of ‘true cinema’, the feature film, *Senses of Cinema* sees the short film as a form in and of itself. And an important one at that. It can be prescient and prophetic; it can reveal the emotional depths of a single situation; it can offer up purely abstract possibilities; or it can tell a story with breathtaking, apt economy.

To coincide with the local, annual St. Kilda Film Festival, a call was recently put out for reflections on people’s favourite short films. They could be from any country or era and any style or genre. The result is an interesting mix of entries that discuss short films from the silent era to the present.

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### **The Entries:**

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*The Unchanging Sea*

(D.W. Griffiths, USA, B&W, silent, 1910, 14mins)

by Paul Harrill

A short film that matters as much to me as any I can think of is D. W. Griffith's *The Unchanging Sea*. When it was released in 1910, of course, *The Unchanging Sea* was probably not thought of as a "short film." I'm not a silent film scholar, but I'm guessing that, at 13 1/2 minutes it was probably considered a somewhat long film for its time. I love this film, *The Unchanging Sea*, and unlike any other Griffith movie (with maybe *Broken Blossoms* [1919] as an exception) it is an easy film for me to love. It's one that I don't have to "put in historical context" to appreciate. I love it on its own terms.

The story is of the utmost simplicity: after a shipwreck, a sailor is lost at sea. He returns, but without memories of his previous life. Meanwhile, in another town, his wife longs for his return. Years later, by chance, the lovers are reunited. Even though Griffith had by this point made many melodramas, the telling of the story comes across with energy, conviction and authenticity. For me, much of this has to do with the remarkable cinematography. Every shot is exterior; all are filmed on location. One can't help but feel Griffith pushing himself to fill his frames with as much of the actual world as he can. Many of the shots are deep-focus long shots of characters looking out at the sea that allow us to focus on the characters or, alternatively, to gaze, like them, at the ocean's endlessly cresting waves. By capturing these crashing waves, real moments in real time, Griffith taps into something timeless. Indeed, I can't ever remember seeing water photographed in a way that so conjures up what it means to stare, in person, out at the sea. And, in this naturalism – this willingness to let the world's beauty speak for itself alongside the more fictive and staged human drama – I see anticipations of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, Rossellini's *Stromboli*, Cassavetes'  *Shadows*, Bresson's *Mouchette* and *Au Hasard Balthazar*, Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, and Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House*. For me, *The Unchanging Sea* stands equal next to them and its brevity only highlights its economy of means and deepens the force of its imagery.

Griffith had been making films for two years when he made *The Unchanging Sea*; he had five more to go before producing his first feature, the notorious *The Birth of a Nation* [1915]. Despite (and because of) its unremitting racism, that film established Griffith for all time as a director that must be reckoned with by anyone interested in the history of narrative film. The critical attention focused on that feature (and by his subsequent features like *Intolerance* [1916], *Way Down East* [1920] and *Broken Blossoms* [1919]) has consigned his shorter pictures to “lesser works” status for most audiences. Simultaneously, *The Birth of a Nation*'s box office success ushered in the age where the feature film would become the primary mode of cinematic exhibition. We, of course, still live in that age.

I find it sadly ironic that Griffith – a man who in short films like *The Unchanging Sea* demonstrated the rich potential of the short form – is, probably more than any other director, responsible for shifting the focus of motion picture production (and discourse) to feature-length films. Perhaps a little bit like the heroine of *The Unchanging Sea* staring out at the ocean, though, I long that the day will return when short films are again embraced by theaters, critics, and the general public. Will my ship come in, so to speak, like it does for Griffith's heroine, or will my longing go unrequited? I guess all I can do is wait and see.

Paul Harrill's *Gina, An Actress, Age 29* (2000) was awarded the Jury Prize in Short Filmmaking at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival. It also played in the 2001 New Directors/New Films Festival, see **the report in this issue** [[HTTP://ARCHIVE.SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/CONTENTS/FESTIVALS/01/14/NDNF\\_REPORT.HTML](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/festivals/01/14/ndnf_report.html)] .



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## **Favourite Shorts**

by Bill Krohn

My favorite American films since my list for *Senses of Cinema* last year [[HTTP://ARCHIVE.SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/CONTENTS/00/11/WORLD.HTML#BK](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/11/world.html#BK)] are three shorts made by people associated with my favorite LA video store, *Cinefile*, which sprang up a couple of years ago next to the Nuart, the repertory cinema where the career of *Eraserhead* was launched.

*Rollingman* (2000, US) by Mike Sakamoto is a comedy with nothing up its sleeves. Harsh black and white images portray the dead-end existence of a man living alone in a shabby house: eating his TV dinner, he is traumatized when the little anthropomorphic Christmas tree he has put on the table to remind him of the season starts singing a programmed song. His reaction – to crawl under the table – is the first step toward an original idea which will lead him to an improbable salvation. Besides being funny and even a little touching, *Rollingman* offers a vision of “a way out” that transforms the human condition without attempting to transcend it.

*Nite Owl* (1995, US) by Nondor Nevai uses color and an array of avant-garde techniques to turn the same situation into a Techno-Beckett parable: a middle-aged man living alone in an apartment whose only window looks out of the mouth of a cartoon head in a mural on the wall of his building proclaiming that “We’re all in this together” goes through a series of grotesque routines having to do mainly with the upkeep of his body, while a voice from the TV that sounds like Alpha 60 played at 45rpm puts the blame for the futility of his existence squarely on him – he might, after all, have found a way out, like the hero of *Rollingman*, if just once in his life (during which he will sneeze out one-and-a-half pounds a year of dead skin particles inhaled after being thrown off by his own body) he had awakened from the trance state that will end when “death blows out the candle for you and makes a wish because you have no wish.”

*Drowning With Others* (1992, US), a remarkably successful black-and-white narrative experiment by Philip Anderson, reinvents “The Twilight Zone” for the ’90s out of the materials of minimalism – a young man driving a car along a deserted road, listening to a radio drama that seems to be the only thing on. Anderson empties out the image and sucks you in with the obsessive tale unfolded by radio voices: a young man on the run from the law is taken in by a doctor who wants to help him by giving him injections, part of a scheme to cure mankind of the mental frailty that “makes people wave when they see themselves on television.” The driver’s journey becomes a voyage to the heart of darkness guided by the story, which we realize – as he will, when it’s too late – is being told only to him.

The “Cinefile Collection,” which can be ordered from **Hadrian Belove**, is a potent reminder that shorts can achieve the most ambitious goals which films can go after by embracing the limits of the form. It also helps if the filmmaker tempers those ambitions with a little humor, which always goes a long way in a short subject.

Bill Krohn is the author of *Hitchcock au travail* (1999), available in English as *Hitchcock at Work* (Phaidon Press, 2000). He has also been the Hollywood correspondent for *Cahiers du Cinéma* since 1978.



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## *His Mother's Voice*

(Denis Tupicoff, animation, Australia, 1997, 14mins)

by Jonathan Dawson

*His Mother's Voice* is a remarkable film that uses rotoscoping techniques to create a realist take on the world in the most abstract of mediums: the animated film. In the (temporary) age of 'fly-on-the wall' documentary fakes likes "Big Brother", this small movie throws up a challenge to all faux naturalism. It should certainly outlast all the populist appropriations and game shows masquerading as verite that currently rule the electronic universe.

Dislocated to Melbourne, internationally acclaimed animator Denis Tupicoff was listening to the (Australian) ABC's radio news program World Today, hoping to hear something new and depressing from the Queensland Elections. A hot issue at the time was the supposedly increasing street violence, and both Coalition and Labor had sworn to bring in Draconian laws as a response to this imaginary crime wave. The national broadcaster had devoted almost seven minutes to a gut wrenching interview with a Mrs Linda Eastgate, the mother of Matthew, a kid gunned down in the usual pointless way for doing not much more than behaving like a teenager on the prowl. What struck Denis – and what had clearly moved ABC editors to give this narrative so much airtime – was Mrs Eastgate's remarkable narrative, from the very moment she was woken by a garbled phone message telling her that her son Matthew had been shot at and wounded in an apparent shoot out with police.

In *My Mother's Voice*, Tupicoff with deadly focus, tracks her nightmare drive through endless suburban streets and the final slow, exquisitely cruel unfolding of Matthew's all too real yet unimaginable death by gunshot. His animation achieves a realism through a coolly restrained animated style that is almost unique in the genre – indeed has long been supposed impossible.

In taking the Eastgate interview whole and building an animated narrative (rotoscoped in large part), Tupicoff has moved beyond the power of his own dark suburban memories in *The Darra Dogs* (1993) to something both more particular and yet more universal – the terrible moment when a parent realises she has outlived her child. Ironically a disaster has brought out Tupicoff's most powerful work in animation, and a style that recalls Russian Heroic realism – all strong low angles and forced perspectives – but with the heroic turned sour and the palette reduced to primaries where red and yellow wrestle with utter blackness for predominance.

There is no ‘quirky’ suburban cuteness here. Only in the dreamlike flashes of Matthew, a Golden Child, caught in some Aussie idyll, sun rimmed, tossing his head and smiling, is there a sense of over determination, of, for a moment, pathos replacing tragedy?

As if to emphasis the space between private experience and public grief (we are all diminished by death), Tupicoff has chosen to use the unmediated interview material twice: the first time to reflect the actuality and linear narrative arc of the drive to the death site; the second, as a bookend.

In Tupicoff’s (mis)use of accepted narrative structures he has anticipated such a film as *Memento* (Christopher Nolan 2000) in remarkable ways. This is one for the long haul.

Jonathan Dawson is a film critic, filmmaker and an Associate Professor of Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Griffith University (Australia).



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### ***Pigs Can Fly***

(Writer/Director Connie Steinhart, B&W, Australia, 1988, 14mins)

by Angelo Salamanca

Over a wailing soundtrack of panpipes and the image of a dying man, a soon-to-be widow recounts in voice-over the myth of Ulysses held captive by the enchantress, Circe, on the isle of Aeaea. The myth tells us how Ulysses’ crew was transmogrified into swine and how Ulysses escaped the spell in order to continue his journey home from the Trojan War.

And so the tone is set for Connie Steinhart's *Pigs Can Fly*. In a pocket of southeastern Australia, a middle-aged woman of Greek birth (Tereza Loizou) lets loose her 600 farm pigs after the death of her husband and ventures beyond the farm's perimeter. The "hero journey" is one of cinema's most common and recognisable themes. In *Pigs Can Fly*, Steinhart uses it well. The narrative centres on a heroine's intended journey from land to sea via a river which winds inexorably towards the coast, ultimately affording an avenue for the heroine's return home.

In the ensuing "Odyssey", the widow (Steinhart does not give her a name) seeks to free her spirit and identity, captured in the act of letting loose her incarcerated pigs. This is merely the first step in tasting again the delights of fantasy and satisfying yearnings that have lain dormant too long. Our heroine's ultimate destination is Greece and the Murrumbidgee River is as good a starting place as any. In mourning-black and clasping her suitcase, the widow takes to the road. She is picked up by a truck driver (Mik McCubbin), a man of few words but with a propensity for bush wit. He's from "nowhere really" and has no family. When the widow declares that her "family" is 600 pigs, the truck driver quips: "I bet you don't take them all to the drive-in at once."

Nightfall, and the traveller seeks shelter. She's taken in by a "sort of widow" – a deserted mother and washerwoman (a well-calibrated performance from Lynne McGanger). Washerwoman feels an affinity with this visitor on her way to revisiting her roots and alludes to her own mother being from Poland. "Maybe you'll go there one day," suggests the widow. "Yeah," replies the washerwoman wistfully, "...and maybe I won't." Finally, assisting the widow on her seafaring journey to the other side of the world is an environmentally friendly yachtsman (Marc Oddie), a man who doesn't wash his clothes in the river for fear of contaminating the water with suds.

Steinhart infuses her film with beguiling moments such as these. Her gentle humour reminds us that we should never take life or ourselves too seriously lest the tragic suffocate the comedic. The film looks wonderful. Steinhart has opted for the magic of grainy, black and white photography to complement the story's themes and style. It is excellent camera work from Steven Cook, assured and captivating, monochrome imbuing the images with heady nostalgia. It's like viewing old photos of young faces – faces of relatives whom we fondly recognise because they had a little of us in them.



*Pigs Can Fly* has a timeless quality. It's not so much dream-like but rather more like that delicious feeling of waking up, not knowing what time it is and not caring to find out. The film is simple in its narrative structure, complex in its themes, sharp in its observations, poignant in meaning, and skilful in its execution. Steinhart encapsulates absolutely that need in all of us – at various stages on our own journey – to tear out the pages of our lives hitherto, cast them to the wind and, come hell or high water, move on.

Angelo Salamanca has been involved in film for 15 years. He has recently written and directed his first feature film.



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### ***Ambition***

(Writer/Director Hal Hartley, 1991, USA, 9mins)

by Daniel Sully

There are several stepping-stones one takes while on the journey of film appreciation. One of the more significant steps for me came when watching Hal Hartley's *Ambition*. I had never seen 'scenes' like that before, hardly ever heard lines like that before, and most definitely never seen performances like that before (well... not on purpose anyway). To use a cliché, it came as a breath of fresh air. Just as I was about to proclaim Tarkovsky as the epitome of all things fantastic about cinema, along comes a short film which knocks me sideways... and it manages to grab me with form and content that differ from Tarkovsky's about as much as is possible. *Ambition* is special because of its fairly unique bonding of a seemingly absurd narrative and over-riding metaphor (and of course, a creative trashing of convention in many shapes and forms). Having found this new shorter format so captivating I set about making my own short film. I probably had a subtle look of terror on my face as I watched it back for the first time – I had been utterly influenced – I had just made *Ambition* Part 2. Except of course, mine was crap... and Hartley's is a mini-masterpiece. Essential viewing for short-film fans.

Dan Sully is a TV

Production student, film lover and wannabe film-maker from the UK.

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## **Animal Humanity: A Look at *When the Day Breaks***

(Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis, animation, 1999, 9.5min.)

by Keith Ulich

Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis open their animated film, *When the Day Breaks*, with a succession of familiar images. Starting on an electrical wall outlet, they track along a cord to a silver toaster. Slices of toast pop up and are buttered by a hand. We don't know who the hand belongs to and there is something vaguely non-human about it. Since, from the start, this is obviously an animated film, we might not give it much thought. Humans are rarely portrayed photo-realistically in an animated world. But just as we are about to settle into our pre-conceived notion of animated character, the hand is revealed as that of a rooster's. The shock then comes, not from the fact that the character is an animal, but instead from how human its movements are. The shock lasts only a moment as we then enter the story proper.

It's a simple tale at that: The rooster goes out to shop for groceries. A pig does the same – she needs fresh milk for her potato skin breakfast. She bumps into the rooster as he comes out of the store, interrupting the flow of their separate journeys. A connection is made, embarrassment on the pig's part and annoyance on the rooster's. It's one of those little incidents that could happen to anyone, and is nearly forgotten. But what happens next changes all that, and the act gains a moral weight that drives the film through to a bittersweet and ambiguous conclusion.

Along the way Tilby and Forbis explore – through their representative animal characters, an intimate animation technique, and dialogue through song – the many facets of humanity. What makes us human? What connects us all together yet simultaneously keeps us apart? Do we learn and grow from our experiences? Or do we forget and stay stagnant? *When the Day Breaks* is the finest short film I have seen to this point both for the questions it raises and the sheer beauty of the world it creates. Go. And ponder.

Keith Ulich is a movie buff based in the suburbs of Manhattan.

## *After the Wax*

(Chaz Maviyane-Davies, Zimbabwe, 17 minutes, 1990)

by Martin Mhando

In *After the Wax*, Chaz Maviyane-Davies mythologises the poetic essence of nationalism. Through the powerful opening and closing image of a dead body, the filmmaker directs us to an examination of the various debates on nationhood. “Should the nation die in order to be re-born?” the filmmaker seems to be asking. *After the Wax* concentrates on the post-colonial divisions of the coloniser and the colonised while the death of the nation is presented as a metaphor for conditions of re-birth and re-incorporation of the nation. The film ends as it began – with an affirmation of complexity of understanding nationhood in African states.

Martin Mhando is a lecturer in Media Studies at Murdoch University.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Various** [[HTTP://SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/AUTHOR/VARIOUS/](http://sensesofcinema.com/author/various/)]

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