**An uncompetitive cinema: the British fiction short film in the 1960s.**

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Word count: 7,379

**Abstract**

This article will offer a historical study of short films and their place in the British cinema programmes of the 1960s as a way of exploring the monopolistic practices which characterised the film industry during this period. Focusing on the short fiction/entertainment film is a particularly useful way of studying competition in the industry because the problems of financing, distribution and exhibition which characterised film production were felt more keenly by those working on short films than they were by those working solely in the feature film sector. The 1960s, and more specifically the mid-1960s, represented a key moment in the history of the short fiction film in Britain. 1966 saw the publication of the Monopolies Commission report into the dominance of the cinema circuits by Rank and ABC, a document which heralded recognition of the problems facing short filmmakers (and filmmakers in general). This article will tell the story of how the producers and distributors of short films in the 1960s jostled to find a space for their products among cinema programmes already replete with Rank and ABC’s *Look at Life* and *Pathé Pictorial* lifestyle documentary serials, and this history will in turn highlight the ways in which the conservative nature of the industry hampered the growth of a healthy, creative short film sector in Britain.

**Keywords**

Short film, 1960s, genre, cinema programming, exhibition, supporting programmes.

**Introduction**

This article will focus on an extremely underrepresented area of the British film history of the 1960s: the fiction short entertainment film. Various types of short film were shown in British cinemas during this period, including entertainment shorts such as *The Six-Sided Triangle* (Christopher Miles, 1963, 30min) and *Miss MacTaggart Won’t Lie Down* (Francis Searle, 1966, 28min); experimental, non-sponsored shorts such as those films supported by the British Film Institute’s Experimental Film Fund; factual films, which included sponsored films; government films; educational, scientific and research films; and, finally, documentaries/newsreel type productions.[[1]](#endnote-1) This article is predominantly concerned with the first type of film. Sketching the history of the short film will allow for an examination of the structure of the British film industry, which in the 1960s was characterised by the duopoly of the Rank Organisation and the Associated British Picture Corporation (ABPC). The decade saw the consolidation of Rank and ABPC as the two main forces in cinema distribution and exhibition, the dramatic increase and subsequent reduction of funding by American companies, the death of particular types of filmmaking (‘B’ movies and ‘quota quickies’) and a series of blows dealt to the independent production sector from which it never fully recovered.

There has never been a comprehensive history of short films because such a thing would surely be impossible, shorts being so varied in character. In the earliest days of cinema all films were short, in that they were not what we would now consider ‘feature’ length. However, the 1960 Films Act defined a short film as any film with a running time of 33 ½ minutes or less, marking a dividing line between shorts, second features (33 ½ - 72 minutes) and feature length films (72 minutes or more), and this is the definition by which this article will abide.[[2]](#endnote-2) In seeking to comment on cinema distribution and exhibition in 1960s Britain, this article is, for the most part, concerned with short films which were shown in cinemas, as distinct from shorts which were shown on television or screened by film societies. Highlighting the plight of the commercial (rather than sponsored) short can offer an insight into the ways in which monopolistic practices in the British film industry suffocated independent filmmakers and hindered the development of a healthy domestic film culture. A wider study of the short film sector will also throw into sharp relief a number of challenges facing new talent, namely a lack of training (with no National Film School until 1971), inflexible distribution patterns and the extremely conservative nature of the exhibition industry. Coupled with the withdrawal of US finance from the industry in the late 1960s, these issues led directly to the barren financial landscape of the 1970s (though it is worth noting that the avant-garde sector was alive and well by that point, having slowly gained momentum throughout the 1960s).

**‘A Look at Death’**

In 1965 documentary director Derrick Knight and film critic Vincent Porter were in the process of compiling a research report for the Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) on the financing and distribution of short films in Great Britain. The pair were so disillusioned by their findings that they provisionally titled their report ‘A Look at Death’, a play on Rank’s much criticised *Look at Life* short documentary series.[[3]](#endnote-3) The situation was not, on the surface, a bad one: between 230 and 300 short films were registered by the Board of Trade in Britain each year.[[4]](#endnote-4) However, as we shall see, the key problems lay in the lack of commercial distribution for shorts, which in turn created problems in obtaining financing. While in many European countries a number of independent exhibitors could choose whether or not to screen a short, in Britain the options were more limited and the big two exhibitors effectively set the pattern for the rest of the industry.[[5]](#endnote-5) Many theatrically screened short films were in fact sponsored by commercial companies like Ford and Shell, and more than a few directors who would go on to become key figures in the annals of British cinema cut their teeth on this type of production rather than in fiction/entertainment shorts. As George Perry, Graham Norton and Terence Kelly had put it in their monograph on the industry for the Institute of Economic Affairs, titled *A Competitive Cinema*, ‘A young man with creative talents in France, Italy or Poland thinks it natural to express himself in terms of film. In Britain, the structure of the industry has alone been enough to ensure that all but the most tenacious turn instead to television or the novel.’[[6]](#endnote-6)

Knight and Porter’s final report, less fatalistically titled *A Long Look at Short Films*, was nonetheless damning in its indictment of a domestic industry so apparently inhospitable to the short form that few filmmakers managed to achieve wide (or indeed any) distribution for their efforts. Some of Knight and Porter’s despondency had followed what had been key event for the industry in 1966 - the publication of the Monopolies Commission’s investigation into the dominance of British cinema circuits by Rank and ABC. Somewhat predictably, the Commission had concluded that the two-company monopoly was ‘against the public interest’, though it ultimately failed to suggest any real remedies to the situation:

Some independent producers say that, because it is necessary to secure a circuit deal, it is also necessary to make films of the sort which they believe will appeal to the circuit bookers... This situation has been described to us as being, from the producers and distributors point of view, ‘all or nothing’ or ‘feast or famine’.[[7]](#endnote-7)

But the Commission’s investigation vindicated independent producers by telling them what they had long known: that making a profit in the domestic market without a major circuit release was next to impossible.

It was not the percentage of the market that Rank and ABC controlled that was influential so much as the overall patterns of exhibition. The total seating capacity for Rank’s cinemas was 23% of the total number of cinema seats in the UK. For ABC cinemas this was 20%, meaning that the two companies effectively controlled 43% of UK cinema seats.[[8]](#endnote-8) ABC and Rank cinemas also tended to be located in strategic areas in London’s West End, and the pattern of exhibition in London set the template for much of the UK.[[9]](#endnote-9) Monopoly was reinforced by the fact that the companies did not compete with each other in selecting films from distributors and operated bars that prevented other distributors from competing with them. In addition, independent exhibitors tended to follow the release patterns set by the two major circuits.[[10]](#endnote-10) Thus, a major circuit deal was worth much more than simply earnings from the Rank or ABC circuits, as many smaller cinemas would play releases which had been successful on the main circuits. And though a major circuit deal would not automatically ensure success - people would still have to go and see the film - the certainty of a number of bookings would ensure a certain level of earnings.[[11]](#endnote-11) This situation was detrimental to the independent producer of feature films, but for the short film maker it was exacerbated by the fact that the two main circuits rarely screened any shorts but their own *Look at Life* and *Pathé Pictorial* magazine programmes.

Fast-paced, technically proficient and usually produced in colour, these films were so varied that it is difficult to group them into thematic categories. Their subjects spanned industry, society and culture, and included pop music, the growing London coffee culture, the post-war reconstruction of Coventry and women in the workforce. However, one thing they do seem to share is a curious disconnection from modern life. *Look at Life* and *Pathé Pictorial* shorts usually feature an older narrator with a cut-glass accent which at times is seemingly at odds with the subject of the film in question. One *Pathé Pictorial* from 1963 discusses the ‘Mersey Sound’ and features a narrator who is most certainly not ‘with it’ as he decries the hairstyles, music and underground club culture of the ‘youth of today’. He ends by incredulously asking: ‘Liverpool has always been a city of song – but is this the music that will live on?’[[12]](#endnote-12) Terence Kelly *et al* praise the ‘brevity, slickness, and a reasonable technical quality’ of these films but are critical of their ‘deadening uniformity and timidity of approach of a kind long put to shame by television.’[[13]](#endnote-13) David Robinson and Ian Wright, reviewing *Look at Life* for *Monthly Film Bulletin* in 1967, tend to agree: ‘In style it is a curious hangover from the fifties – decent enough technically, but made by people who seem to be unaware that since the arrival of documentary programmes like *Panorama* and *24 Hours* audiences have acquired an appetite for something less supine. *Look at Life* subsists on that broad breast of tolerance which the circuits mistake for enjoyment at their peril.’ [[14]](#endnote-14)

The *Look at Life* films were produced by Rank’s Short Films Unit, were easy and economical to make and received a wide distribution, showing weekly in 1200 cinemas in the UK and subsequently travelling abroad to 33 different countries. Each individual film enjoyed a theatrical life of 18 months to two years.[[15]](#endnote-15) The *Pathé Pictorials* provided a similar function for the ABC circuit. After 1960, short films became eligible to receive double payments from the British Film Fund, a pot of money collected from the ‘Eady’ levy on box office receipts and intended to be redistributed to the producers of films qualifying as ‘British’, including those funded by the Hollywood studios.[[16]](#endnote-16) This benefitted Rank and ABC, as the major exhibitors would usually book their own shorts, though it rarely worked in the interests of other short filmmakers. Indeed, Knight and Porter note that of the £269,000 Eady money allocated to short films in 1964, the greater part went to *Look at Life* and *Pathé Pictorial*.[[17]](#endnote-17)

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Table 1 shows that in 1964 216 short films were registered with the Board of Trade.[[18]](#endnote-18) The situation would appear healthy, but when we look at how this breaks down, we see that almost half of these films consist of Rank and ABC’s own productions. The Monopolies Commission had pronounced *Look at Life* and *Pathé Pictorial* ‘detrimental’ to the short film maker, and recommended that the Rank Organisation discontinue its practice of giving regular weekly bookings to its own short films in order to free up some room on the major circuits for shorts by independents. Robinson and Wright wrote that this recommendation concealed ‘a whiff of gunpowder’ – though perhaps it stood out as being the only concrete change suggested by the Commission.[[19]](#endnote-19) Rank’s Chairman, John Davis, was irate about the possibility of restricting screenings, arguing that so long as the films were popular there was no point in ceasing production. He wrote in *Kinematograph Weekly* that ‘we are quite prepared to bring *Look at Life* to an end – if and when the cinemagoing public for whom it is made wish us to do so. Nothing in our recent experience suggests even remotely that that time has come.’[[20]](#endnote-20) In1966 the results of Rank’s market research through Group Marketing Limited prompted the company to happily announce in *Kinematograph Weekly* that a whopping 87% of cinemagoers thought that *Look at Life* ‘added to the evening’s enjoyment’.[[21]](#endnote-21) However, no reference was made to the size of the sample and, as the Monopolies Commission had found, there were few real alternatives on offer.[[22]](#endnote-22) In Rank cinemas *Look at Life* films were shown 15,600 times in 1966, while other shorts and documentaries were shown 3,110 times.[[23]](#endnote-23) There was much discussion at the time in *Kinematograph Weekly* regarding Rank’s culpability in all this, while in the same year Kelly *et al* wrote, ‘If statutory instruments laying down the terms under which the levy is distributed are framed without apparent reference to the realities of the power structure, it is only business-like for those who have the power to go on using it to their own benefit.’[[24]](#endnote-24)

Rank did subsequently go on to limit the showing of these short lifestyle films in individual cinemas to 39 weeks in the year, pledging to free up the other 13 weeks for the screening of other (non-Rank produced) shorts and documentaries.[[25]](#endnote-25) Rank actually stopped making the series in 1970 (a decision which was parodied in an episode of the radio programme *I’m Sorry I’ll Read That Again*, in which the team offered a ‘clip’ from *Look at Life* ‘episode 3,700,463’ titled ‘Wheelbarrow Trekking’: ‘What’s wheelbarrow trekking? Well, it’s a cross between pony trekking and underwater octopus rape’).[[26]](#endnote-26) The cancellation of *Look at Life* did not, however, free up room for fiction shorts in cinema programmes. This was because another key problem lay in the low booking rates paid for short films, which meant they could rarely cover their production costs. In a letter to *The Times* in 1969 George Elvin, General Secretary of the ACTT, said that although the abolition of *Look at Life* would be desirable to make way for the showing of other short films in cinemas, this was not feasible because:

There will never be an adequate supply of good short films whilst the most they can hope to achieve from cinema distribution in this country is £700 and the minimum cost can seldom be less than £2000…the production of short films must be made financially worthwhile and we urged the government to do this in its current review of films legislation.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Shorts might also be sold to television, and though this would provide an audience, a producer could expect to receive something in the region of £200 for a half-hour film costing thousands of pounds. Add to this distribution costs and a loss seemed inevitable for the short film producer.[[28]](#endnote-28) Unfortunately, the National Film Finance Corporation, a key resource for independent filmmakers, agreed, stating that:

This country produces some of the best shorts in the world, many of them for official or industrial sponsors, but the commercial market provides no satisfactory outlet for high-class shorts…frequently the Corporation has to reject applications for short films which promise to be excellent entertainment precisely because a loss for the Corporation and the producer is a practical certainty.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Production costs were only ever going to rise, and rapidly. In 1967 *The Times* provided a breakdown of costs for one recent 20 minute ‘prestige’ short:

Script: £350

Production staff: £2000

Artists fees: £750

Studio hire and labour: £1,750

Location expenses: £600

Film stock, processing and sound stock: £1,450

Music: £950

Other: £800

Producer: £750

Other labour costs: £600[[30]](#endnote-30)

Given that Derek Hill’s Short Film Service, ostensibly a cinema club that bought and screened films, was offered £200 by MGM for a film which cost £10,000 to make, it is difficult to see how or why filmmakers were able to survive solely by working in this sector.[[31]](#endnote-31)

It is worth noting that Table 1 above does not reflect the small rag-tag but growing band of alternative and experimental filmmakers who received occasional help from the British Film Institute, which had been sporadically funding short films for over a decade. Over ten years the BFI Experimental Film Fund had helped to produce 24 films with a total budget of £9000, and when we consider that the BFI’s filmmaking budget over this period was around the same as the cost of making one 20 minute commercial ‘prestige’ short, this seems an astonishing figure.[[32]](#endnote-32) Union rules were waived for many of these productions – otherwise the budgets would have been much higher - and the BFI did not charge for distribution (normally 40%).[[33]](#endnote-33) After 1964 the Experimental Film Fund was renamed the BFI Production Board, given an increase in funding and the capacity to support features as well as shorts, though many of the films supported by the Board would not have enjoyed a wide commercial release.

Margaret Dickinson argues that the film industry was a closed industry but that there was a new growth of technically proficient amateurs who were becoming active in cinema in the early 1960s. Critical acknowledgement, though, rarely translated into paid work: ‘The history of the British Free Cinema shorts and of *It Happened Here* demonstrates how extremely difficult it was for new filmmakers to get a footing in the feature industry or for enterprising independents to find an audience, let alone make a living.’[[34]](#endnote-34) (*It Happened Here*, a largely amateur production offered an alternative history of WWII in which the Nazis won, took almost eight years to complete on a miniscule budget of $21,000[[35]](#endnote-35)). Michael Darlow offers a bleaker view and sketches an image of a mainstream industry closed to new ideas, where union ranks were arranged against newcomers seeking to break in.[[36]](#endnote-36) However, although shoring up the industry was not the intention of the scheme (rather, it was ‘keeping alive a tenuous tradition of non-commercial experiment’) many BFI shorts were directed by filmmakers who would go on to become important figures in British cinema, such as Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and Ken Russell.[[37]](#endnote-37)

This was a movement that was gaining momentum, and by the late 1960s a new creative culture was thriving on the streets of Soho, as new independent cooperative film companies sprang up:

Geographically and politically close to each other, eking out a living between one commission and another, they tended to eat in the same small Soho restaurants and drink in the same pubs. Here they discussed new projects, agreed to lend each other equipment, swapped news and debated the latest political developments.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Though many technicians working in the industry were making experimental films in their spare time, this was a sector which was operating very much outside the commercial cinema. It may be better to take Dickinson’s lead here and refer to these productions as ‘alternative’ rather than independent. This culminated in a situation where, though commercial opportunities were few and far between, Britain was home to a thriving avant-garde filmmaking sector which was running parallel to the mainstream industry. However, the frustration on the part of many filmmakers struggling to work *within* the structures of the film industry in the 1960s continued to grow.

**Shorts and cinemas**

A lack of space for fiction short films among cinema programmes was compounded by the fact that the exhibition industry was slow to change with the times. In the post-war period cinema exhibition was characterised by the double-feature format in which an ‘A’, or ‘first’ feature would be followed by a shorter, second feature or ‘B’ movie, and this was the prevailing mode of exhibition to which cinema audiences would have been accustomed. In addition, cinema programmes would often be interspersed with cartoons, advertisements and sponsored shorts. By comparison, the exhibition of fiction entertainment shorts in British cinemas was actually fairly rare. Michael Birkett argued in 1963 that cinema exhibitors were too wedded to a particular pattern of programming and that audiences, far from being conservative ‘by nature’, were rather conservative ‘by habit’ and should mix up programming formats to appeal to increasingly sophisticated audiences.[[39]](#endnote-39) According to *Sight and Sound* the short film suffered from the industry’s continued reliance on the double-feature programme which meant that:

the Rank or Pathé filler is quite enough to complete the bill. Where a particularly long feature makes a double feature out of the question, a British short is in direct competition with any number of cheap American fillers imported in enormous quantities and often sold outright. But the double feature still remains the short film’s most obstinate enemy.

Market research and press commentary on attitudes to cinema programming in the 1960s suggests highly conflicting views regarding audience preferences for second features and/or short films, preferences that could vary by geographical area. Kelly *et al* argue that audiences preferred second features to a programme of short films, because ‘people are used to having a second feature and feel they are not getting their money’s worth without it, even if it is a bad one’.[[40]](#endnote-40) By contrast, an attitudes survey conducted among cinemagoers in the Greater London area found that audiences were fairly nonchalant about second features, and seemed to use them as a method of timekeeping to ensure that they were there in time for the main film.[[41]](#endnote-41) As for the question of whether audiences might prefer screenings of shorts instead of second features, there had been a real dearth of research in this area, although 62% of respondents to a 1965 BBC research survey stated that they would prefer a programme of shorts to a second feature, while only 23% would prefer a second feature. However, it is clear that the exhibition of short films for entertainment was something of a catch-22, in that audiences needed to become accustomed to programmes of shorts instead of second features, but in order for this to happen there had to be space allowed in the cinema programme for short entertainment films.

However, not all shorts released in the 1960s were comprised of Rank and Pathé fillers, as Table 1 shows. What other kinds of short films were screened in British cinemas in the 1960s? As we shall see, a large number of the shorts released in the decade were funded and distributed by just a few companies. Some, like the short serials of the Children’s Film Foundation (CFF), were made for entertainment but not for profit, while pop-music films and short DJ Sets aimed to capture the attention of capricious youth audiences. Anglo-Amalgamated’s *Scales of Justice* series seemed a curious hangover from the old ‘B’ movie thrillers which had their heyday in the 1950s, while 30-minute ‘mini-featurettes’ began to be produced with the dual purpose of accommodating increasing running times in cinema programmes while also filling the gap the B movie had left behind. One might expect true innovation to occur at the lower-budget end of the spectrum, in those shorts produced by the small companies scrimping to deliver on time and under budget. With the exception of the films funded by the BFI’s Production Board (which usually did not achieve a wide release) this was not always the case. The following analysis is based on information drawn from a database listing production information for all short films released between 1960 and 1969, with the data drawn predominantly from Denis Gifford’s comprehensive *British Film Catalogue*. The database does include a few films over 33 ½ minutes, particularly experimental films funded by the BFI and shorter fiction featurettes not quite of the length to be considered second feature films, where those films are interesting in some way in content or production context.

Categorising films by genre is a problematic exercise which is subjective and open to interpretation, and Gifford’s genre classifications are especially so. For instance, in his *British Film Catalogue*, Loach’s 1969 film *Kes* falls under the category of ‘animal’ film! But in this case it can be useful, because when we apply Gifford’s labels to short films there is an obvious split between uniformity and diversity in each category. For example, Gifford’s ‘musical’ category refers almost solely to musical acts performed by popular bands of the day, while ‘Religious’ refers solely to films made by the Religious Films Service and shown predominantly in Rank cinemas on Sundays. ‘Children’ refers to films made by the Children’s Film Foundation, while most ‘Crime’ films comprised Anglo-Amalgamated’s *Scales of Justice* mystery series, narrated by Edgar Lustgarten. The genre classifications of ‘Comedy’, ‘Drama’ and Fantasy’ are far more difficult to define and analyse, and will be unpacked here with greater care. Figure 1 illustrates the types of short films shown in cinemas between 1960 and 1970:

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Films produced by the Children’s Film Foundation comprise a large proportion of the fiction shorts which were screened theatrically between 1960 and 1969. The CFF was known for making films of around an hour in length, many of which were artistically and technically impressive – indeed, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s last collaboration took the form of a CFF film, a colourful, whimsical fantasy titled *The Boy Who Turned Yellow* (1972). However, the Foundation also sponsored many short serials which ran for several episodes. CFF films were not released commercially; the CFF was funded by a self-imposed levy on industry and films were primarily shown at children’s Saturday cinema clubs, from which adults were barred.[[42]](#endnote-42) These short serials provided opportunities to directorial and technical talents as well as established filmmakers such as Ernest Morris, C. M. Pennington Richards and Frederic Goode. The films were distributed by the CFF, although a few were also distributed by New Realm Pictures. They were typically broadcast in serial form, although there were a few standalone adventures featuring a particular character – for example, three films of around 16 minutes in length star a character named Joey who embarks on a series of adventures. Set in a variety of foreign locations, the CFF films would generally see a group of children embarking on a series of adventures, forming rescue parties, or thwarting an evil villain. The serial *Treasure in Malta* (Derek Williams) follows the children of an archaeologist who team up with a peanut vendor to thwart the machinations of a loot-stealing criminal. The serials could also veer into fantasy; the *Danny the Dragon* series (C. M. Pennington Richards, 1967) follows a group of children as they help an alien to recover his vehicle, which has crashed and is invisible.

‘Religious’ shorts tended to be three-minute morality tales produced by the company Religious Films, screened predominantly on the Rank circuit, and guided by the residual influence of the devoutly Methodist founder of the company, J. Arthur Rank. For the most part, these are short imaginings of parables taken from the bible, although some longer films such *as Marvellous And It’s Real!* (Walker, 1968, 25min) offer more involved stories from the *New Testament*. Many short films also fall into the ‘crime’ category. Low-budget second features tended to fall into this genre category simply because the production of whodunits and ‘potboilers’ were easy to shoot and therefore cost-effective. After rising budgets and changing tastes rendered the production of this type of film impractical, the half-hour crime drama found a home on television. Anglo’s *Scales of Justice* series was the only remaining exception. These films ran to around 30 minutes each, were made by ‘B’ movie veteran Jack Greenwood for production company Merton Park, and were produced in colour after 1966 (a slightly belated concession to the direction in which cinema had been moving from the early 1960s). Often narrated by crime writer Edgar Lustgarten, the series was largely adapted from his original stories and feature a formulaic plot in which a crime is solved, or an unfairly-blamed accusee exonerated.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

A large proportion of short films released in the 1960s fall into the ‘musical’ category as defined by Gifford. These are almost exclusively short pop music films showcasing bands (such as *The Bee Gees* and *The New Seekers*). They could also include footage of pop and rock concerts, as in Tony Palmer’s *Colosseum and Juicy Lucy* (1970, 33min). Other pop music vehicles include Harold Baim’s films *Swinging UK* (1964, 28 min) and *UK Swings Again* (1964, 27 min). The latter was released in the USA as part of the feature film *Gonks Go Beat* (Robert Hartford-Davis, 1965). Disc jockeys introducing a series of popular songs or acts also tended to be a common format in films belonging to Gifford’s ‘musical’ genre. Notable exceptions are Douglas Hickox’s 29 minute film *Les Bicyclettes De Belsize* (which was distributed by British Lion and shown as the support to Roy Boulting’s 1968 film *Twisted Nerve*) Stan Strangeway’s 1965 film *1812* (Napoleon’s Russian campaign re-enacted with toy soldiers [18 min]), and Kenneth Hume’s *Mods and Rockers* of the same year (mod girl takes up with rocker boy, causing fight in vicar’s youth club [28min]). Particularly notable is *Rhythm and Greens* (1964), a 32-minute film in which The Shadows present a history of England from the Stone Age to the present day, beginning the film dressed as cavemen playing music with rudimentary instruments and ending on a modern-day beach. Narration in the style of a nature documentary provides a humorous counterpoint to the youthful energy of the film.

It is in the ‘comedy’ genre that we find a number of genuinely intriguing short films, many of which comment self-reflexively on tropes and working practices in cinema, television and advertising. These films in particular exemplify the ways in which shorts could operate as a testing ground for ideas, experimentation and subversion which might feed into and be influenced by modern cinema. This is evident Miles’s *The Six Sided Triangle* (1963, 30min), an ambitious effort which deals with a common theme in popular cinema – the ‘eternal triangle’ - and shows viewers what might happen if a film about a husband returning home to find his wife with her lover were made in each of six different countries: in silent film era USA, England, Italy, Japan, Sweden and France. The *Evening News* was impressed by Miles’s lampoon of contemporary cinema, noting that ‘to have all the film-going experiences rolled into one half-hour is rather unnerving’ but that ‘each of these episodes is a satirical delight.’[[43]](#endnote-43) Apparently the Academy agreed, as the film was nominated for an Oscar in 1963 in the category of Best Live Action Short. Indeed, favourable reviews on the part of the critics who, as Miles writes, were ‘getting sick and tired of the usually boring "Look at Life" shorts’, as well as the efforts of the British Lion, helped to bring the film a relatively wide release and even a profit.[[44]](#endnote-44) Indeed, Miles’s antipathy to *Look at Life* - *Rhythm n’ Greens* was originally to be called ‘A Look at Rubbish’ in tongue-in-cheek homage to the magazine series before Miles was made to change the title - belied the fact that the film may have indirectly profited from the series by presenting exciting alternative to the staid circuit programming on offer.[[45]](#endnote-45)

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Animator Bob Godfrey was one of the few directors who, like Miles, was consistently engaged in short film making in the 1960s, and his films also tend to make satirical commentaries on the films, music and popular culture of the era. His 1962 film *A Plain Man’s Guide to Advertising* (20min), another comedy short championed by British Lion, offers a send up of cinema and television advertising techniques, while his three-minute *Battle of New Orleans* (1960) for Biographic has a more slapstick flavour, and involves musicians staging a mudfight to the music of Lonnie Donegan. *The Plain Man’s Guide* sets out to offer a well-observed dissection of the advertising industry but instead ends up providing an almost fatalistic view of film production. The film is structured around the repartee between the narrator (the advertising instructor) and the ‘plain man’ who is sitting in the cinema audience looking unimpressed with a slew of fake adverts for razors and toothpaste. The self-referential narration of Bob Godfrey’s *The Plain Man’s Guide To Advertising* and the use of line drawing and cut out animation purports to satirize the advertising industry but instead effectively highlights the absurdity of filmmaking (‘We can't show too many cartoons. Cartoons are expensive and this film was made on a shoestring’). There is genuine ire behind Godfrey’s mocking swipe at the industry here: in 1962 *Sight and Sound* reported that Godfrey’s company, Biographic, was considering moving into second/‘B’ feature films. Godfrey’s *Do-It-Yourself Cartoon Kit* (1961, 6min) had yet to recoup its £1000 budget despite securing distribution through British Lion, while *The Plain Man’s Guide to Advertising* was held up while the company waited for the NFFC to supplement its £2000 cost with another £3000. As a result, Godfrey decided that *Plain Man* would be Biographic’s last short.[[46]](#endnote-46)

The high incidence of short films parodying cinematic genres and modes is interesting, perhaps suggesting a growing cine-literacy that would fit well with the early to mid-1960s tendency towards satire in cinema and popular culture.[[47]](#endnote-47) *The Pride of The Regiment* (Frank Gardener, 1963, 13min) features narration by Peter Sellers linking a series of short clips from silent cinema, parodying the classic mode for comic effect. Sellers also stars in the far more well-known *Running, Jumping & Standing Still Film*, a frenetic, eleven-minute slapstick comedy made in a field over one weekend for the paltry sum of £70 and subsequently nominated for an Academy Award. Slapstick comedies of silent cinema tropes almost become a trend in this period. *The Intrepid Mr Twigg*, made by horror director Freddie Francis for British Lion, contains no dialogue and follows the adventures of an accident-prone motorist. John Croydon of completion guarantor Film Finances did not think much of the film’s mooted shooting schedule, its gag-heavy script or the £11,000 budget, writing in his cost report: ‘It is impossible to comment sensibly on this proposition.’[[48]](#endnote-48) The film itself is an almost painfully boring series of laboured comedy set-ups culminating in gags so obvious that while watching one can almost hear the mass groaning it surely inspired from audiences.

Also part of the comedy genre is the half-hour ‘mini-featurette’, which became something of a trend in the late 1960s. Following his long career as a producer/director of ‘B’ movies in the 1940s and 1950s, Francis Searle saw an opportunity to produce a series of 30-minute colour films that he termed ‘screen miniatures’. Like Searle’s ‘B’ pictures, his ‘screen miniatures’ were far from ground-breaking; they were predictable efforts featuring archetypal characters and stock situations. The funniest and most original, *Miss MacTaggart Won’t Lie Down* (1966, 28min) was the first in the series. The film follows the eponymous Miss McTaggart as she return to her hometown to discover that the authorities have declared her legally dead after mistaking her for her twin sister. She embarks on a series of petty crimes in an effort to have herself arrested and declared legally alive. Searle followed *MacTaggart* with the fantasy film *Talk of the Devil* (1968, 27min), a re-imagining of the Faust legend that was in filming at around the same time as Stanley Donen’s *Bedazzled* (though *Talk of the Devil* lacks the clever twists and charming schadenfreude of the latter). *Talk of the Devil* film sees a henpecked husband make a deal with the devil to escape his domestic chores and nagging wife. Searle’s other half-hour shorts included *Gold is Where You Find It*, about a drunk Irishman who loses his gold nuggets and starts rumours of a gold rush, and *The Pale-Faced Girl* (1969), a drama about a night out in a Dublin club.

Producers of ‘mini-featurettes’ were convinced that these films had an increasingly important role to play towards the latter part of 1960s. Producer John Hogarth noted in correspondence to Searle that the demise of the second feature coupled with the increasing length of ‘epic’ type films had created a vacuum in the market which might easily be filled with shorter ‘three-reeler’ supports.[[49]](#endnote-49) Some exhibitors also became less wedded to the traditional programming format as the decade progressed, and as Robinson and Wright supposed, there must have been a growing market for shorts in the late 1960s given the fact that ‘the double-feature is already an anachronism’.[[50]](#endnote-50) But however commercially sound Searle’s reasons for pitching such a programme of films (at a frugal £10,000 per film, each short could be expected to make a modest profit with a major circuit showing coupled with Eady money and foreign sales), Rank remained cautious about backing the programme, while Monarch Film Distributors refused to fund Searle’s proposed programme of ‘screen miniatures’ until Rank had agreed to distribute the films. This resulted in something of a stalemate, and archive correspondence suggests that Searle had to work hard to convince both Monarch and Rank of the viability of the programme.[[51]](#endnote-51) Though Monarch funded many of Searle’s ‘miniatures’, the comedy *It All Goes To Show* (1969, 28min) was distributed by Crispin, while *The Pale-Faced Girl* (1969, 27min) found distribution through Planet.

It is worth noting that Searle was not the only one who seized upon the opportunity - between 1967 and 1969 the US company Paramount distributed five colour films of around 30 minutes length, shorter entertainment subjects that could be conveniently paired with feature films. These were mainly comedy films: In *Albert Q.O.S.O*, (Ian Brims, 1967, 27min) ‘a roadsweeper saves the Queen’s Corgi’ according to Dennis Gifford’s synopsis. There was also *The Undertakers* (Brian Cummins, 1969, 29min, ‘day in the life of two inept undertakers’), *The Waiters* (Jan Darnley-Smith, 1969, 30mins, ‘slapstick mishaps of drunken waiters at an elegant party’), *Bachelor of Arts* (Harry Booth, 1969, 31min, ‘foreign student causes chaos during weekend in Britain’) and a crime film titled *The Green Shoes* (Ian Brims, 1968, 27min, ‘police track killer of a girl wearing green shoes’). However, Paramount had the resources to fund such a programme.

It is also important to bear in mind that, from the exhibitor’s perspective, it was difficult to simply choose supporting programmes from a variety of sources because often the distributor dictated the programme. Exhibitors would usually take the package of supporting films offered by a distributor because sourcing such material independently was costly and time consuming.[[52]](#endnote-52) According to the Monopolies Commission, some 100 distributors had complained of conditional booking – being unable to select one suitable film from a distributor without also taking others.[[53]](#endnote-53) Furthermore, the exhibition sector was not known for favouring change; it remained largely conservative at a time when leisure habits were changing. With the rise of television and complex changes in patterns of urbanisation and social habits cinema exhibition had, from 1950, been gradually moving from a casual experience to a more formal ‘event’. As Penelope Houston put it, ‘An industry which had encouraged its audience to regard it as habit … discovered with a deep sense of shock and affront that the wares it had been selling for so long as necessities were suddenly being treated as luxuries.’[[54]](#endnote-54)

Press commentary and industry research published at the time suggests that the exhibition industry was split between those afraid of driving audiences away and those who favoured a changing cinema programme to move with the times. This was an industry racked with anxiety and indecision, an industry in which many individual exhibitors were torn between the desire to innovate and the strong influence of firmly established patterns of distribution and exhibition. Kelly *et al* may have recommended that independent exhibitors be allowed to book their supporting programmes separately from the main feature and ‘shop around’ for the best product, but putting this suggestion into practice was far from simple.[[55]](#endnote-55)

**Conclusion**

The renewed interest in the potential development of a healthy indigenous film sector which followed the publication of the Monopolies Commission report in 1966 perhaps hinted at an underlying insecurity regarding the extent of US funding in the UK industry – and the potential catastrophe which would occur if the Americans were to leave the UK market *en masse*. As this article shows, discussion around the plight of short films in the 1960s served to highlight the fact that the exhibition sector was conservative and slow to change, and it is testament to the tiredness of the circuit supporting releases that anything which sought to break the mould (such as *The Six Sided Triangle*) was greeted with overwhelming relief by the critics. The structure of the industry remained so inhospitable to the short form that truly profitable, interesting shorts which received a wide release were few and far between. But this was not just the fault of the exhibition sector - trends towards change were hampered by the monolithic structure of the industry, and the government measures which were put in place to protect filmmakers tended to be unhelpful or even to actively work against them. It was clear that the Eady levy did not help the production of shorts in the way that was originally intended; indeed, the levy tended to be subverted in favour of the main two exhibitors, which meant that it was more profitable for larger companies (like Anglo, Rank and ABPC) to make programmes of their own shorts for guaranteed distribution. While there was theoretically a market for half-hour shorts towards the end of the decade as cinema programming changed, the industrial factors discussed above meant that this fledgling enterprise never really took off. As Knight and Porter (and many others) had foreseen, the lack of a domestic training ground and opportunities for new filmmakers was to be to the industry’s detriment when American companies did indeed pull their finance from the industry in the early 1970s.

**Notes on contributor**

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**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my colleagues Professor Duncan Petrie, Dr Melanie Williams and Dr Richard Farmer for their helpful advice and feedback on drafts of this article. I am also indebted to the CATH Research Centre and the completion bond company Film Finances for allowing me access to their archives. Finally, I would like to thank Andrew Pixley and Joseph Choonara for their feedback, advice and patience.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/L014793/1] and constitutes part of ‘Transformation and Tradition in Sixties British Cinema,’ a research project based at the Universities of York and East Anglia.

**Notes**

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2. Knight and Porter, *A Long Look at Short Films*, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. David Rider, ‘Death View’, *Films and Filming*, August 1966, 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Derek Hill, ‘The Short Film Situation’, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Summer 1962, 31: 3, 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Knight and Porter, *A Long Look at Short Films*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Terence Kelly, Graham Norton and George Perry, *A Competitive Cinema* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1966), 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Monopolies Commission, *Report on the Supply of Films for Exhibition in Cinemas* (London, Monopolies Commission, 1966), 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Monopolies Commission, *Report on the Supply of Films for Exhibition in Cinemas*, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.*, 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. British Pathé Archive, ‘The Mersey Sound’ (June 1964), Film ID 283.09. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Kelly et al, *A Competitive Cinema*, 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. David Robinson, ‘Shorts and Cinemas’, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Spring 1967, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ken Gay, ‘Popular life’, *Films and Filming*, November 1962, 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Jonathan Stubbs, ‘The Eady Levy: A Runaway Bribe’ in *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Volume 6, Issue 1 (2009) 1-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Knight and Porter, *A Long Look at Short Films*, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Robinson, ‘Shorts and Cinemas’, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 14 January 1967, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 26 November 1966, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Robinson, ‘Shorts and Cinemas’, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Kelly et al, *A Competitive Cinema*, 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Hansard: Hugh Jenkins, ‘Monopolies Commission’s Report’, HoC debate, 8 June 1967, vol 747 cc250-2W250W. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
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31. Knight and Porter, *A Long Look at Short Films*, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Hill, ‘The Short Film Situation’, 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
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36. Michael Darlow, *Independents Struggle: The Programme Makers who took on the TV Establishment*, (London, Quartet books, 2004), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. *Kinematograph Weekly*, November 1966. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Kelly et al, *A Competitive Cinema*, 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
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43. Image from <http://www.christophermiles.info/Films/Six_Sided_Triangle/press.html>, accessed 24 March 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. See director Christopher Miles’ comments on the film on his website <http://www.christophermiles.info/Films/Six_Sided_Triangle/comments.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. <http://www.christophermiles.info/Films/Six_Sided_Triangle/press.html> accessed 30 September 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Derek Hill, ‘The Short Film Situation’, 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. The television series *That Was The Week That Was* arrived at the height of the satire boom, while Talbot Rothwell’s scripts for the Carry On… series brought film parody to popular British cinema in the form of *Carry On Cleo* and *Carry On Screaming*, among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Film Finances Archive (hereafter FFA): *The Intrepid Mr Twigg*: John Croydon to Film Finances, n.d. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Laura Mayne, ‘Whatever happened to the British ‘B’ movie? Microbudget film-making and the death of the one-hour supporting feature in the early 1960s’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
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