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(Extra) short film study: an emerging narrative practice within global community

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Abstract

This article documents a research on the emerging phenomenon of (extra) short film production, that transcends the limits of national characteristics, while having a worldwide distribution, in mostly young audiences. Social media have brought in the frame of audiovisual narratives, through the use of filmic language, a popular practice of storytelling. All kinds of genre are allowed, with a time constraint of a few minutes, not to say seconds. These genres not only have their own audiences, but also gain new ones, due to the way the extra short films are being projected, in a non-linear and often random sequence. In this new “filmic” landscape, the notion of copyright takes a whole new meaning: copy becomes a kind of recognition and homage to the original director, who in turn, becomes instantly famous among thousands of followers. Are these (extra) short films capable of forming a sur-genre themselves? In the context of social media, is video production becoming a new form of folk art?

Keywords: extra short films (ESM), social media, Tiktok, Instagram Story, filmic language, user-generated content (UGC).

Introduction

The emergence of (extra) short film production is massive in the field of social media, such as TikTok and Instagram (specifically in the form of Instagram Stories). Memories, experiences, hobbies and habits or fictional storytelling, all acquire an international dimension and are distributed globally. The use of smartphones that contain a camera, screen and software, has become ubiquitous, allowing people of all ages and means to have access to and combine the necessary tools for filming, editing and distribution in one device, in a very effective way.

Furthermore, they provide access to other people’s audiovisual content, and offer the possibility of commenting on this content and influencing it semantically, as well as affecting the social status of its author.

Christian Metz (1991: 69) says, “a film is difficult to explain, because it is easy to understand”. In the case of ESMs as Tiktok and Instagram Stories, content is easily produced and consumed, however inversely, explaining the phenomenon is difficult.

Filmic Characteristics of extra short films

As Monaco (2000: 183) says, “we can describe briefly the basic aspects of the syntax of the frame. Two aspects of the framed image are most important: the limitations that the frame imposes, and the composition of the image within the frame (and without necessary regard to it).

Since the frame determines the limit of the image, the choice of an aspect ratio suggests the possibilities of composition. With the self-justification that has been endemic to the elusive subject of film esthetics, early rhetoricians waxed eloquent over the value of the Academy aperture, the 1.33 ratio. When widescreen ratios became popular in the 1950s, the classical estheticians bemoaned the destruction of the symmetry they perceived in the Academy aperture, but, there was nothing sacred about the ratio 4:3 (Monaco 2000: 184).

The question is not which ratio is “proper” but rather which codes yield themselves to exploitation in which ratios? Before the mid-fifties, it seems, interiors and dialogue dominated American and foreign screens. After the introduction of the widescreen formats in the 1950s, exteriors, location shooting, and action sequences grew in importance. This is a crude

generalization, but there is some useful truth to it. It's not important whether there was a cause-and-effect relationship between the two historical developments, only that widescreens permitted more efficient exploitation of action and landscape codes" (Monaco 2000: 184).

With regards to extra short movies (ESM), both TikTok and Instagram change the traditional frame orientation, turning it by 90°. They are destined to be viewed with the phone screen in a portrait position, so the recommended dimensions both for TikTok and Instagram Story videos are 1080 x 1920. The aspect ratio is 9:16.

Shots are mostly "normal", including the full shot, three-quarter shot and the medium shot. We often see closeups, as well as a new and widely used shot, the selfie. Long shots and extremely long shots are rare. All shots are realized with a single lens, that of the smartphone. Depth perception is poor as focal length is automatically calculated by the recording device.

The film's setting is often the home of the protagonist, who is also the moviemaker and the editor. Editing depends of the recording and projection tool, which is one and the same: for the first time, the editing device is the projection device itself. In a purely functional sense, it is obvious whether an ESM has been produced as a TikTok or as an Instagram story. Especially regarding Instagram Stories, the whole audiovisual output, created by the juxtaposition of random images and videos, is temporal and unique. Furthermore, it's not meant to be downloaded and saved as a unique movie, so there are many hacks and side-apps aiming to do just that.

Having said that, these two social media have created specific codes and a filmic language, that testify to the provenance of their outputs: To a viewer, it's clear whether an extra short film has been produced on TikTok or Instagram. These tools are not just a trend, but also constitute a large part of the audiovisual identity of their products. Copyright and authorship risk to be ascribed from the human-author to the authoring tool.

"The structure of cinema is defined by the codes in which it operates and the codes that operate within it" (Monaco 2000: 175). A code that is purely cinematic is montage. Codes that operate within the micro-narratives examined in this article, relate to recognizable social stereotypes, which include dressing and decorative objects. Big brands, forms of clothes and ways of combining them, together with body gestures, as well as LED light interior decorations offer the heroes their social and aesthetic status in a straight forward manner.

Authors in their majority are not trained in a film school and do not have any special filmic or narrative education. Their practice is mainly intuitive and mimetic; so is their acting and editing. Regarding techniques, mimesis is an effective way to learn.

In this narrative landscape, genres are limitless, ranging from mainstream to sophisticated. ESMs with the above characteristics, form by themselves a sur-genre, embracing all possible content and genres.

The case of Instagram Stories

Instagram stories, in their majority, are formed as an unorthodox accumulation of pictures and videos in a random succession, which is based on the timing of their upload. They have not been directed as coherent filmic narratives, but they can be downloaded as such, via side-apps (not directly from Instagram itself). Given that film introduces the parameter of time/duration to pictures, for the first time in this article, Instagram stories are being examined as standalone films.

Instagram often has a psychotherapeutic use for its content producer. From this perspective, the user creates a personal profile, built with images (containing pictures, text and often special effects), showing an ideal version of her life. Beautiful people in amazing places, sexy sports, expensive clothes and accessories, exotic food and cocktails as, all form the lens through which the person would like to be perceived.

Since 1984, when *The Second Self* was first published, Sherry Turkle looked beyond how we use computer games and spreadsheets to explore how the computer affects our awareness of ourselves, of one another, and of our relationship with the world. "Technology," she writes, "catalyzes changes not only in what we do but in how we think." In the 90's and early 00's we used to speak of the formation of fictional avatars into role-playing games (RPG), such as *Final Fantasy* and *Second Life*, and of the way they influenced the player's social profile and thus, social "virtual" life. One could say that the analog of RPG in the 2020's, is the creation of Instagram memories and Stories.

Instagram Stories are formed in a quite original way. Restrictions on viewing time (they vanish after 24 hours) and duration define the final output. The user is invited to upload either pictures or videos, as many as she wishes, under the restraint that the total duration does not exceed 7 seconds for photos and 15 seconds for videos¹.

Montage is also quite original: the content plays in chronological order from oldest to newest. The juxtaposition of videos and still images form extra short films, which can be provided with some interactivity with the addition of polls, quizzes and emoji sliders. Unlike common Instagram posts, viewers' comments to stories are notified to their directors as personal messages, for private reading. It seems that Story composition and distribution is treated by Instagram with a certain sensitivity, as if a film's director should not be judged in public, but rather be commented on through the more mature and responsible medium of an eponymous personal message. Of course, Instagram Stories are composed not only for reasons of personal expression, but also for advertising purposes.



Figure 1: Personal Instagram Stories by individual users

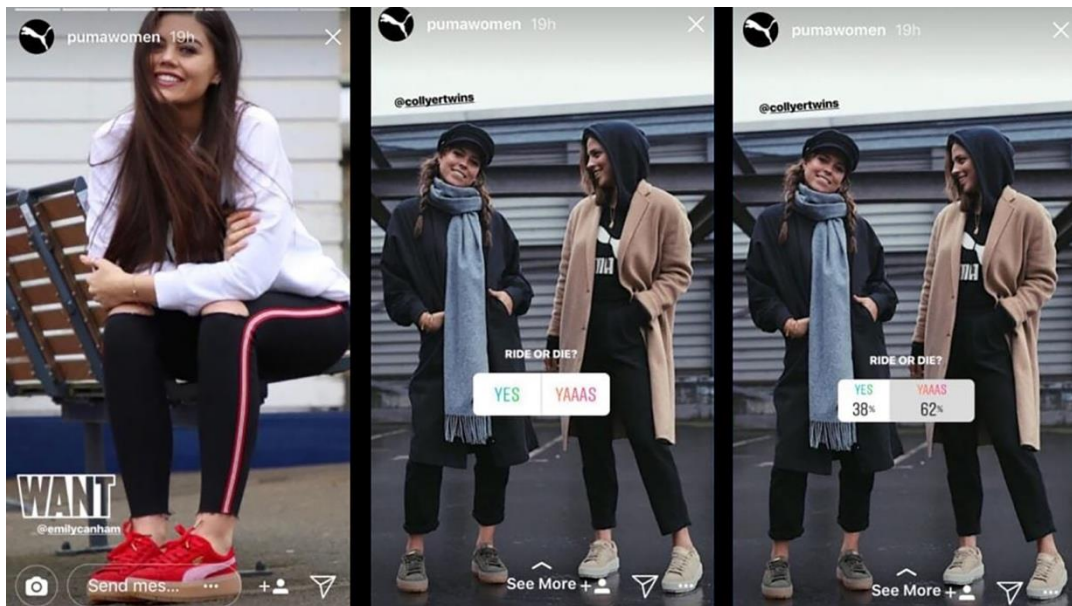


Figure 2: Instagram Story Add for Puma

The case of TikTok

Much like Instagram, TikTok distributes *user-generated content* (UGC). As Hui Zuo and Tongyue Wang (2019: 2) point out, “ordinary users find in TikTok an outlet for their display desire”. They refer to Daniel Bell (1979 in Wang & Zuo, 2019:2), who claims that the characteristic of popular culture is “to continuously express and rebuild oneself in order to achieve self-realization and self-satisfaction”. According to Zuo & Wang (2019: 2), “the mode of UGC on the TikTok platform is that the platform empowers each ordinary user to produce content to meet the psychological needs of their self-presentation”.

Self-presentation thus, becomes a synonym for *self-direction*, in a narcissistic narrative where the protagonist and the director converge as the same person. Often the setting is the home of the director-hero herself (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic times) and the main shot is the *selfie*.

Unlike Instagram stories, where films occur from a kind of random montage, TikTok offers user-friendly editing tools. Furthermore, the notion of *challenge*, widely used in UGS, familiarizes the users with fundamental functions of traditional montage, and encourages them to experiment, bringing to mind the original first time film-directors, at the ending of the 19th and start of the 20th century. Of course these very important directors first explored the possibilities of montage (ex. The Vanishing Lady by Georges Méliès in 1896, Colleen Moore in Ella Cinders by Alfred E. Green in 1926 etc.), however TikTok functions as a workshop for the implementation through mimesis of those crucial discoveries, by (mostly) young people, who lack any historical-theoretical background on cinematography.

Cinematic language has become part of popular culture around the globe. Since the middle of the 20th century, cinematic language with its conventions has been intelligible by millions of people on an international level, surpassing linguistic restrictions. People became familiar with semiotic conventions such as *flash-back* and *flash-forward*, and that level of *watching comprehension* pushed many forms of audiovisual narratives (not only films in their traditional forms, but also TV ads) to present more and more complicated stories with indirect messages, composed in a targeted way so that their interpretation would lead to precise conclusions, away from the risk of misinterpretation. Although film audience is skilled in reading films, it is incapable of composing them.

Interactive digital media often function as a workshop for film literacy, offering tools and motivation for experimentation with filmic language. The notion of *challenge*, widely used in

UGSs, often leads to one-shot films of specific content. The #icebucketchallenge is an example of a one-shot extra short film, where the hero challenges other people to do the #icebucketchallenge and then, has a bucket full of ice cubes falling over her/his head. LeBron James, Donald Trump and numerous other people have followed this trend.

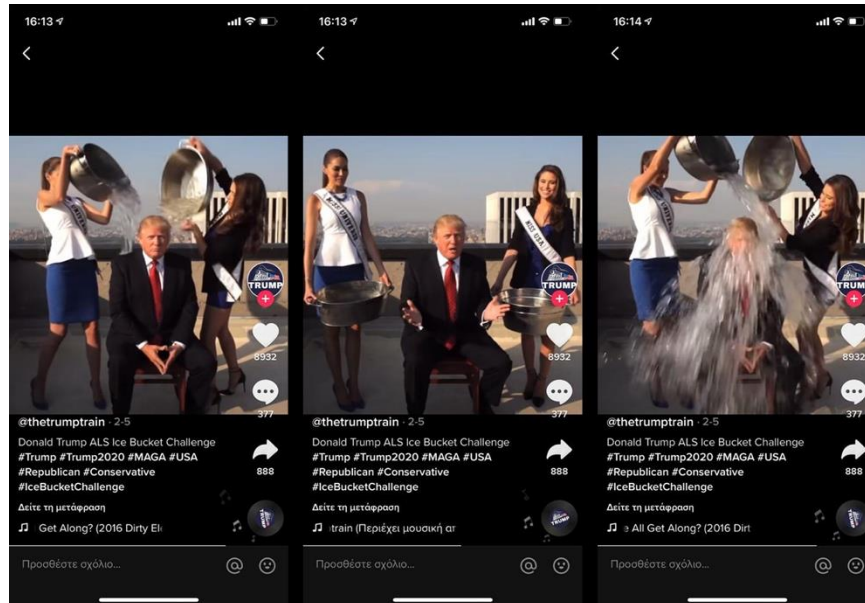


Figure 3: The Tiktok #icebucketchallenge by Donald Trump

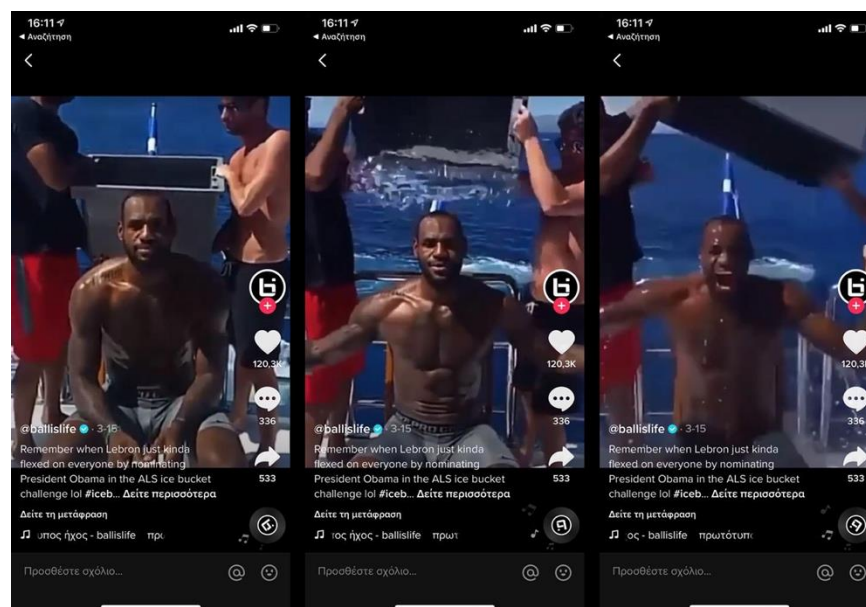


Figure 4: The Tiktok #icebucketchallenge by LeBron James

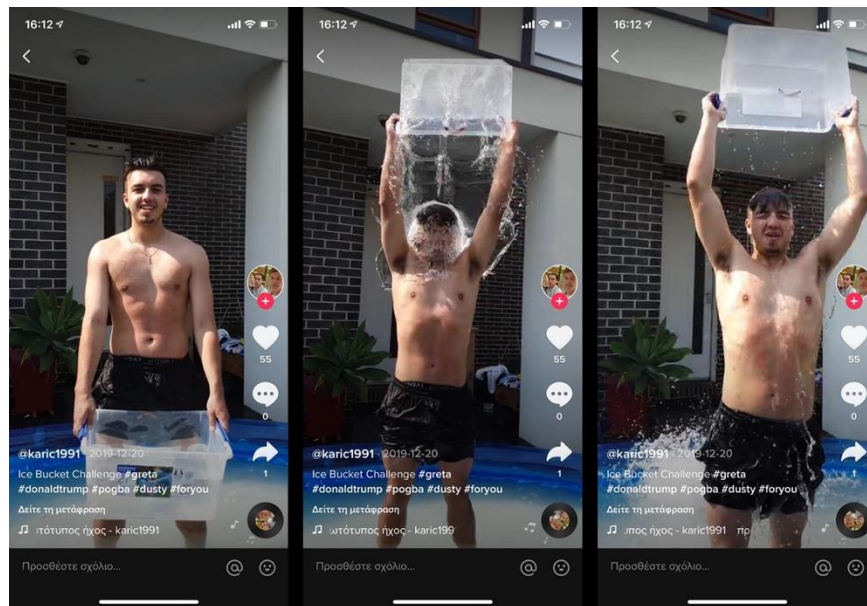


Figure 5: The Tiktok #icebucketchallenge by individual user

An example of the mimesis of specific montage as part of an audiovisual narrative is #skuh, a challenge composed over the sound of *Body* by T Wayne. It is composed of two shots, mediated by a cut. In the first shot we see a number of people dancing, and suddenly we pass on the second shot, where the same people are still dancing in the same positions, but now wearing their hoods and the frame is trembling up and down in a glitchy movement.

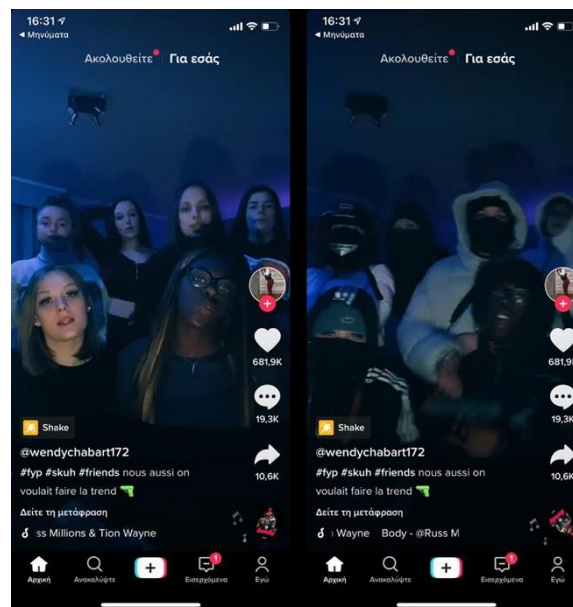


Figure 6: The Tiktok #skuh by group of friends



Figure 7: The Tiktok #skuh by father and daughter

Conclusions

The constant flow of reproduction and distribution along with the inexplicable shifting from anonymity to fame and the reverse, bring to mind the saying of Christian Metz (1991 in Monaco 2000: 160), that “An easy art, the cinema is in constant danger of falling victim to this easiness”.

As Guy Debord (1977: 68) had predicted, “to become consumers, we must also be consumed; to enter new modes of communication, we must be communicated. Once photography democratizes the portrait, everyone becomes a spectacular image”.

Regarding the language of the extra short films being studied in this article, the selfie stands out as the basic shot. Given that a) at COVID-19 era people spend most of their time in their homes and 2) the selfie is the most common shot, micro narrations occurring from this described procedure carry a sense of *voyeurism*. The intimate settings and the positioning of the heroes opposite the camera, often addressing it as if watching in a mirror, place the gaze of the spectator behind the door and through the keyhole, creating a clandestine performing-watching relationship. Admiration is expressed not only via positive (or negative) comments, but also with obvious and unapologetic imitation.

Movements of followers and haters exalt extra short movie (ESM) idols, through numerous imitations. Hashtags serve as useful metadata for the retrieval and identification of the ESMs themselves. Besides, ESMs would be nothing without the existence of hashtags; they would vanish in the unfinished data pool of mobile Apps. Copy and annotation are a homage to the extra short moviemaker by her colleagues. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

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Image 2, <https://blog.snappa.com/instagram-story-dimensions/> (10/3/2021).

Images 3-7, Tiktok (10/3/2021).

¹ In case the video exceeds 15 seconds, Instagram automatically splits the first minute in 15 second successive fragments. If the video is longer than a minute, the use of a third-party tool will be needed.