

# The Short Film and Its Champion. An Interview with Richard Raskin on His New Book: *The Yin and Yang of Short Film Storytelling*

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## WHO IS RICHARD RASKIN, AND WHY DID WE INTERVIEW HIM?

Few academics dedicate their love and work to analyzing short films, and possibly now more than ever. It could seem fruitless given the media saturation on our mobile devices, where almost all platforms turn something into a “story.” Born in Brooklyn in 1941 but naturalized Danish in 2002, Richard Raskin has dedicated his academic life to the analysis of short fiction films, the design of stories, persuasion strategies for commercials and advertising, as well as image studies of the Holocaust, Jewish humor, and recently the Tao in stories—as reflected in his book *The Yin and Yang of Storytelling* (2022).

With a Ph.D. in French Literature and another in Philosophy, Raskin has been a professor at several universities since 1963, a jury at numerous international film festivals, and a founding editor of various publications. His articles have been published in numerous media, with more than ten books published. He has also written and directed short films; for example, *Seven Minutes in the Warsaw Ghetto* (2012), written by him, received among many international awards a Special Distinction at Annecy, Festival International du Film d’Animation, 2012.

One of his most popular contributions are his seven parameters for short films (Raskin, 1998), which is undoubtedly a handy didactic approach for filmmakers. This way, his contribution to academia is not only relevant but also refreshing due to his specific and vast profile in which disciplines, philosophies, and an original way of approaching cinematographic art are intersected<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>To read more about Richard Raskin, check out <https://www.raskin.dk/>

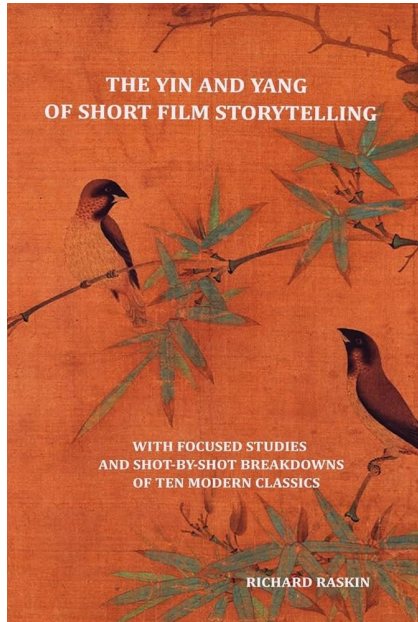


FIGURE 1. Book cover.

## THE YIN AND YANG OF STORIES

To talk about Raskin’s most recent book, *The Yin and Yang of Short Film Storytelling*, it may be essential to address where these concepts come from. The Taoism philosophy derives from the treatise on the Taoist King of the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse, whose birth is located more or less around the 6th century BC. It is the second most translated book after the Bible, and the word *Tao* is also used in Confucianism, Chan Buddhism, and Chinese religion.

The word *Tao* combines two characters, one representing a foot taking a step and the other representing a head. The last one has been translated as “sense”, “reason”, “principle,” and in some texts, as the literal translation off “way” or “path.” Moreover, the word *Te* can be interpreted as “power” or “virtue.” And *King* as “book”, “canon”, or “Bible”.

The first paragraph of this small treatise, which is easy to read—although it has undergone countless translations—begins thus:

The Tao that can be expressed is not the Absolute Tao  
 The name that can be revealed is not the Absolute Name  
 Nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth  
 With-name is the Mother of all things. (Lao-Tsé, 2019)

The *Tao* cannot be known, defined, or limited; if they are curious, we will let the readers read this text for themselves, going beyond the translations. On the other hand, *Yin* and *Yang* are two fundamental concepts for the theory of Taoism or Daoism, and surely we have all seen their visual representation:



*Yin* and *Yang* are two complementary forces in the universe where nothing is static but constantly evolving and moving. Although they are opposite forces, they are complementary, and neither of the two is absolute because there is something of the other in each of them. *Yin*, for example, is the dark, cold, containing part that is more passive and receptive; therefore, it has been given more of a feminine character. The *Yang* is the action, the light, the heat, and the power; therefore, it has been

given more of a masculine character. As we have already mentioned, none of these principles is absolute since the balance and the flow of constant change lie in their interdependence.

In his latest book, *The Yin and Yang of Short Film Storytelling*, Raskin applies these philosophical principles to make a fascinating analysis of some short films<sup>2</sup>. So, he analyzes ten short films frame by frame identifying the complementarity of these two forces to develop a schematic picture that let us identify both types of forces. Either, from the creation; that is, from where it can be identified on the filmmakers at the time of filmmaking—as in the decision of the structure, the camera-setting, and many other elements. And, on the other hand, from inside the stories; that is, from the characters—the *Yin* and *Yang* of their actions or predispositions within the stories.

It was to be expected that after following his career, this new form of analysis seemed to us not only fresh but original due to the crossing between the philosophical and the artistic. Of course, all of this is developed in a punctual academic way that can be easily followed, and that undoubtedly gives rise to a much deeper reflection of each short film.

This book is available on different platforms, so we highly recommend its acquisition. Without further ado, we present to you what we discussed with Richard Raskin and his contribution to *El ojo que piensa*.

## INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD RASKIN

**Annemarie Meier (AM)** We were delighted to discover your studies focused on Short Fiction Films. We eagerly studied your book *The Art of the Short Fiction Film: A Shot-by-Shot Study of Nine Modern Classics* (2002). Particularly, your deep approach, the parameters suggested in Story Design. Your analysis method — appropriate for filmmakers, investigators, and film critics—that had a significant influence on my investigation and essays about short films and have accompanied my students and future filmmakers in their learning process. For me and my colleague Paola Villa—a filmmaker, producer, and screenwriter—short film storytelling has been our shared passion for many years, which is why I invited her to join us for this conversation. We read with enormous interest *The Yin and Yang of Short Film Storytelling* published recently, and we are delighted about the opportunity to have a written conversation with you.

<sup>2</sup>You can find a review of this book in the section “Enfoques” of this issue.

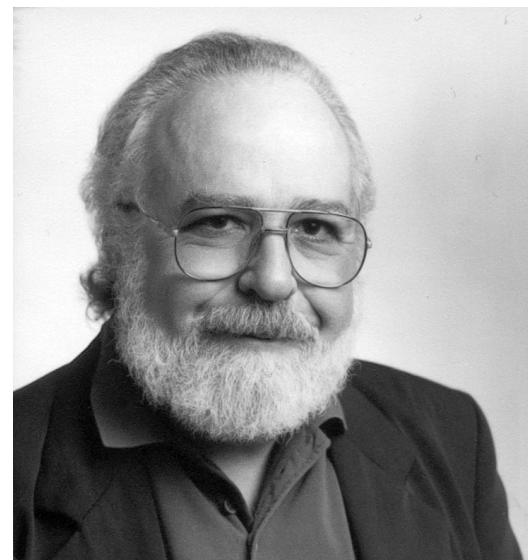


FIGURE 2. Richard Raskin.

**Richard Raskin (RR)** I'm grateful for your interest in the book. I'll do my best to answer your questions truthfully. Forgive me if some of my answers seem surprisingly brief. I am a firm believer in the "less-is-more" principle.

**Paola Villa (PV)** We believe it might be worthy, to begin with the most probable obvious question or, like other people say, address the pink elephant in the room. We would like to ask you why—or when—you felt the need to pair your short film studies using ideas and concepts of Taoism: *Yin* and *Yang*.

**RR:** About 10 years before I wrote the book, I was an adviser to a Finish student named Saara Cantell, whose doctoral dissertation was on the short film. A chapter in her study was called "Zen and the art of the short film," and described ways in which short film storytelling is in harmony with Asian aesthetics. Though I had forgotten that discussion—or thought I had—when I began to work on my book, her pages must have been the seed from which my thinking grew. Today, Saara Cantell is one of the most productive screenwriters and directors in Finland.

**AM and PV:** What did you discover on the way, and why is your new approach especially appropriate to analyze and interpret storytelling in short films?

**RR:** Though many beginners making their first short films are not aware of this, *holding back* is an essential part of short film storytelling. It's the source of the magic, what makes a great short film breathtaking. Many beginners do the *opposite*, they *overtell* their stories. Taoism is largely about *holding back* and has important lessons for the beginner.

**AM and PV:** What do the words *Yin* and *Yang* mean in your model or paradigm?

**RR:** I use the words ungendered, to eliminate a terrible gender bias. Each of the words has many meanings. In a nutshell, *Yin* means "holding back", "not doing", "absence", "vulnerability", leaving room for the viewer within the film, openness to interpretation, letting the viewer connect the dots. *Yang* means "structure", "seriality", "symmetry", "causality", "power", "presence", "doing". Just to give you some idea as to what storytelling properties are involved.

**AM and PV:** In the preface, you mention two goals for your new book: Enabling filmmakers to tell better stories, and students to "understand more fully the sub-

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tleties of short film storytelling.” We admire your primary goals as we also discovered the richness and diversity of short films while working with students and young filmmakers.

Nevertheless, recognizing short films as an autonomous form—or type—of film and analyzing its divergent properties with seven parameters, you showed us that your extended studies reached a theoretical—and philosophical—approach.

We have widely discussed how most film theories and film studies approach short films as the origins of cinema, and at best, as the way to become a professional filmmaker and then jump into feature films. We believe research owes short films a broader view than that. As Godard when he said “c’est le film qui pense”, and Josep M. Catalá when he defends film as a “*Cine del pensamiento. Formas de la imaginación tecno-estética.*” We believe that short film itself is its own art form and *filmthought*. Maybe even, the purest form of cinema.

**RR:** I agree completely. The short film is an art form in its own right, not just a ticket to making feature films. I think film schools are largely to blame for not recognizing the intrinsic value of the short film. It’s the poetry of cinema. A Chinese master once said: the writer’s message is like rice. When you write prose you cook the rice; when you write poetry you turn the rice into rice wine. A great short film is intoxicating like rice wine. Yes, the purest form of cinema.

**AM and PV:** Most of the few Latin American Studies focused on short film use to compare it with literature and its forms, like short stories, poems or mini-fiction. Hilmar Hoffmann—founder of the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen—used to describe two forms of short films. The first one, a big group imitating the structure and narrative of a feature film, and the second one, a group of short films seeking new forms of storytelling and meaning. A Swiss researcher recognizes short films as “the art of reduction”—*Reduction* in the sense of the culinary term to reduce a sauce to its essence. What would you say if a colleague or student would limit his theoretical research to one of these terms?





FIGURE 3. *Wind* (*Szél*, Marcell Iványi, 1996).



FIGURE 4. *Andy Warhol Eating a Hamburger* (Jørgen Leth, 1982).

**RR:** I think Hoffman’s distinction makes sense. What he calls the big group, I call *novelle-film*. These are miniature feature films—typically 20 to 40 minutes long—such as graduation films at film schools. In my view, they should not be called “short films.” Their storytelling properties are about the same as those of “feature films”. True short films are typically under 10 minutes long and have their own set of storytelling properties:

- In the short film, conflict is not necessary. Short films are not necessarily conflict driven. There can be conflict in a short film, but it is merely optional.
- In the short film there is no character arc. No fundamental transformation of characters. Instead, there are character moments—moments when characters make choices that change their situations. The characters don’t evolve or change.
- In the short film, wordless storytelling—no dialogue—is a real option.

These are, in my view, the three main differences between the short film and longer narratives with which they are often confused.

**AM and PV:** We believe it would be interesting for our audience to understand how you selected the films you analyze in your most recent book, given they are a very rich selection.

**RR:** Each of the films was selected for two reasons: the film was a good example of the principle to be illustrated, and it was a film I loved and could watch over and over again without getting tired of it.

**AM and PV:** One more question regarding the Dao or Tao. If this philosophy is about renouncing the illusion of control, how could this apply to the creative impulse and the material manifestation of stories? How, in your opinion, could filmmakers approach this in their art?

**RR:** As described in the chapter on *Andy Warhol Eating a Hamburger* (Jørgen Leth, 1982), the most fascinating moments of the film result from Warhol’s misunderstanding. He thought a cue would tell him when to speak his one line, but that cue would never come. And as he continued waiting for it, he became progressively more uncomfortable and nervous, an interesting to look at. The director Jørgen Leth, always welcomes unexpected events during a shoot and he allows them to change the direction of the film. In other words, he is willing to let go and to let the film take on qualities he hadn’t chosen; in other respects, of course he remains in full control.

**AM and PV:** Please talk to us about the short films you directed and what themes interest you as a creator. Is your creative persona the same as your scholar's inner self?

**RR:** I only directed one short film because I quickly discovered that I am not good at that. I am ok as a writer and leave directing to people who are good at that. The one I directed—and wrote and produced—was called *Life is Like a Glass of Tea* (Richard Raskin, 2010) and I regret not finding someone else to direct it.

**AM and PV:** Your “Parameters for Story Design and Guidelines for Student Filmmakers” have an important presence in our classes and workshops with students at our university and young filmmakers of independent groups. With great interest and curiosity, we studied the examples you analyze in your new book. So, we would be very pleased to read a general remark about *Memory of the Sea* (*Recuerdo del mar*, Max Zunino, 2005), a Mexican short film we appreciate a lot and use to analyze with our students. The 3-minute sequence shot with the noise of waves reaching a beach, has only two brief comments in Spanish: At the beginning, a man's voice says: “I'll never forget when I saw the sea for the first time . . .” And at the end: “It seemed very big.”

**RR:** I won't say much about this excellent film in particular, other than to point out that it is a great example of *holding back* and to note that the abandoned car effectively indicates something about disrespecting nature, which in turn influences the speakers' experience of the sea. I think there is an implicit causality in play. But in general, I really appreciate brevity and simplicity in narratives of every kind. Forgive me if I'm repeating a quote already used, but I love St. Exupéry's view that “perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing left to add but rather when there is nothing left to take away.” 🍵

“In general, I really appreciate brevity and simplicity in narratives of every kind. [...] I love St. Exupéry's view that ‘perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing left to add but rather when there is nothing left to take away.’”





FIGURE 5. *Memory of the Sea*  
(*Recuerdo del mar*, Max Zunino, 2005).

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ANNEMARIE MEIER is Professor, Researcher and Film Critic in Guadalajara, Mexico. She has published Articles and Essays in Journals and Collective Books. In 2013 she published a Book about *Short Film: El cortometraje: el arte de narrar, emocionar y significar*.

PAOLA VILLA was a Professor for Audiovisual Medias at the University ITESO in Guadalajara, Mexico during 14 Years in addition to directing and scriptwriting for cinema. Her Short Films **6:00** pm (2007), **Uno** (2012) and **Alberca** (2018) won National and International Prizes.