

# Review of *The Yin and Yang of Short Film Storytelling*, by Richard Raskin

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The first thing that catches the reader's attention when holding the book in his hands is the "oriental" design of the cover that shows, on an orange-colored background, delicate bamboo branches and leaves with two birds. The image arouses curiosity for a theoretical book focused on short film's narrative, the same as the allusion to Eastern philosophy in the title. When opening and reading the book, we find a clear structure, straightforward language, and the visual appeal of many pages with shot-by-shot *breakdowns* of short films. The explanation of the philosophical ideas and concepts is transparent; and their detection commented on a series of short films by influential filmmakers, convinces and enriches the viewing of the films, of which technical sheets include the links to watch them.

The book—structured in a preface, introduction, and four chapters—is aimed at scholars and analysts of the short film as well as students, filmmakers, and amateurs. In a highly stimulating way, the most recent publication by the researcher and professor at the University of Aarhus (Denmark) proposes to detect and review in short films—of less than ten minutes in length—the narrative and aesthetic strategy with which captures and moves the viewer. For this purpose, he resorts to the Daoist philosophy by focusing on the different ways how filmmakers and the characters of short films are placed in front of the facts narrated.

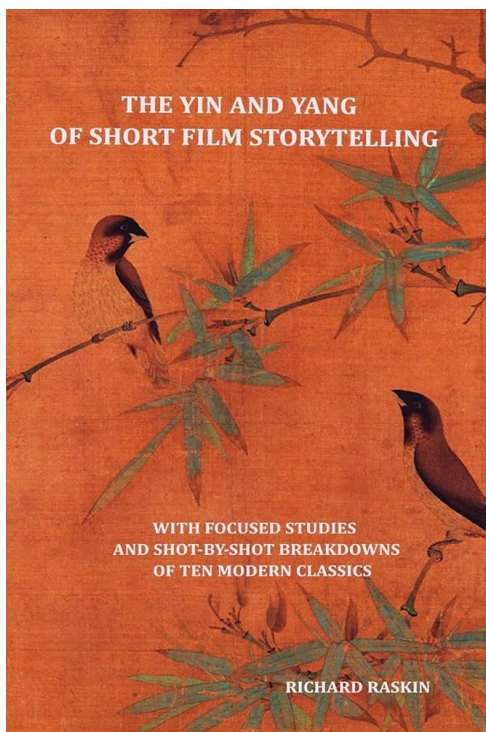
In the preface and introduction, Raskin (2022) emphasizes that the reason for writing the book was to focus on short films' aspects that have yet to be acknowledged. After approaching short film narration twenty years ago with a series of paradigms, Raskin found in Daoism a tool for analyzing and understanding certain narrative and techno-aesthetic strategies characteristic of short films that moves them away from cinematic narrative conventions. For this new approach, Raskin freely interprets the *Yin* and *Yang* concepts, as well as the Daoism philosophy. He argues, for example, that he

does not approach concepts with a gender perspective since that would distort the depth of the philosophical idea.

Interestingly, as a researcher and academic, Raskin always retains sight of the educational perspective. As an objective of his book and the new approach to analysis, for example, he comments that he intends to encourage filmmakers to produce better short films and enable students to understand the narrative subtleties that characterize short films more deeply. It is unsurprising that he takes advantage of the introduction to present a synthesis of his previous publications. He reminds us that twenty years ago, he worked on a conceptual analysis model that is still applied in the teaching and study of short films in educational centers in Denmark. Unfortunately, this analysis model has not received the attention it deserves in Mexico. Perhaps because it is not translated into Spanish, but maybe also because short films are still a little valued format among film scholars, reduced to a “student exercise” that prepares new filmmakers and is still considered a minor film format.

With his proposal of parameters twenty years ago, Raskin distanced himself from the conventional narrative structure that indicates the steps to develop a conflict, that eventually comes to a resolution. His approach was based on the idea that short films’ narrative is best described in terms of divergent characteristics that balance each other in a dynamic interaction. His seven-parameters model defined the following aspects: a) the interaction between short films centered on a character or the character’s interaction; b) the interaction between causality and decision; c) consistency and surprise; d) image and sound; e) a character and an object or a piece of the set; f) simplicity and depth; and lastly, g) economy of means and the set of media. Through books, articles, a magazine, and a guide for students, Raskin spread his theoretical vision in Denmark, Northern Europe, and the USA.

But let’s get back to his new book, *The Yin and Yang of Short Film Storytelling*. Chapter One, “Reference Points in Daoist Philosophy,”



describes and exemplifies the concepts corresponding to the author's new approach. The concepts' interpretations are thematized and they are referred to interpretations that different philosophers contributed to the Daoist philosophy. He also clarifies that his analysis of the short films referred in the book focuses on the concepts of "non-doing" and "non-being," where the *Yin*—as *Containment (holding back)*—and the *Yang*—as structure and control, are inseparable and complementary.

Chapter Two, "A Paradigm," begins with a chart in which the author distinguishes between the *Yin* and *Yang*, which corresponds to the position of the filmmakers and the one that defines short films' characters. For the *Yin* of the filmmaker, Raskin points out five categories: a) the *Yin* of omission; b) of inner space; c) of interpretability; d) of the acceptance of the gifts of chance; and lastly, e) the *Yin* as *locus*. For the *Yang* of the filmmaker, he distinguishes the following: a) the *Yang* of structure; b) causality; c) mechanized power; d) the practice of production; and lastly, e) the *Yang* as *locus*. Whereas for the *Yin* of the characters he distinguishes the following: a) *Yin* of non-action; b) doubt; c) vulnerability; and lastly, d) "not being present." While for the *Yang*, he points to a) action; b) taking advantage of an opportunity; c) being in charge; and lastly, d) being present. In the rest of the chapter, each scheme possibility is explained with examples and breakdowns for the short films that comprise Chapter Three.

Going through Chapter Three, "Studies of Short Film," is a joy for any professional and film lover as it presents the technical data sheets, the links to watch the selected short films, and the awards of these ten classic short films. Starting with ***Two Men and a Wardrobe*** (1958) by Roman Polanski—a cult work of film surrealism, the author analyzes and interprets short films by Kieslowski, Panov, Malmqvist, and Asgard, among others. Raskin's detailed analysis and interpretative approach create a new and stimulating appreciation of short films' narrative, aesthetic, and philosophical

power. At the same time, it reinforces the conviction that short films are actually an autonomous form of cinema, a cinema freed from certain commercial norms and conventions, and therefore they are loaded of meaning.

However, Raskin does not limit himself on applying his new approach to short films discourses. He also dedicates Chapter Four, “Additional examples of other art forms,” to apply an analytical method to examples of long-duration discourses: literary, visual, and audiovisual types. For example, he analyzes the *Yin* of interior space in the work of the writer Paul Auster. Also, the *Yin* of omission in the empty spaces of Chinese ink drawings and oriental gouache, as well as a drawing by Henri Sorensen—in which Raskin detects the *Yang* in the painter’s work—and an Impressionist painting by Claude Monet—in which Raskin finds the omission of materiality. He also refers to Hemingway and his theory of omission as he describes scenes from the films *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather Part III* (1990) by Francis Ford Coppola; and *The Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, 1987) by Wim Wenders. Other examples of *holding back* cited and interpreted by Raskin are the lyrics of a 1940 anti-Nazi song and some scenes from the movie *Schindler’s List* (1993) by Steven Spielberg. While Vincent van Gogh’s painting *The Sunflowers* (1888) leads to the detection of various types of *Yang*.

Richard Raskin concludes his remarks on short films in his “In a Nutshell” section. He sustains that short films reach his narrative excellence when by his *holding back* strategy, it leaves the task of recognizing its essence to the viewer. Raskin mentions the elements that make short films incredibly dense and loaded with meaning: a) the containment of characters; b) the simplicity of the story; c) the progression by causality; d) the *Yang* and the director’s openness to take advantage of “the gifts of circumstantial events”; etc. The comments also contain two caveats: in the first place, the lack of *Yin* can be translated into an extension of short films length without

improving them; and in the second place, the lack of *Yang* can lead to an overloaded narrative that could distract from the short films' essence. The short films with a balance between the *Yin* and *Yang* are pure cinematic poetry, Raskin concludes, then he proceeds to share the origin of the ideas that resulted in his book.

As readers and reviewers, we only can add our admiration for a deep, original, and creative academic work focused on short films and their narrative essence. As well as our acknowledgement of short films as an autonomous type of cinema, expressive in their narration and visual-sound aesthetics, and profound in their significant and philosophical content. Finally, we believe that Richard Raskin's book, *The Yin and Yang of Short Film Storytelling*, has delved into the understanding of this film genre, and the proposition of a method for a new approach. 🧠

# Bibliography

RASKIN, R. (2022). *The Yin and Yang of Short Film Storytelling. With Focused Studies and Shot by Shot Breakdowns of Ten Modern Classics*. New Orleans: Quid Pro Books.

ANNEMARIE MEIER is Professor, Researcher and Film Critic in Guadalajara, Mexico. She has published both articles and essays in Journals and Collective Books. In 2013 she published a book on Short Films titled: *El cortometraje: el arte de narrar, emocionar y significar*.

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