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Microcinema: What Are the Ultra-short Films of the Digital Age?

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Abstract

The distribution of content in the online environment in the 21st century required the emergence of new methods to attract an audience to online products. This trend is a response to the exponentially growing amount of content generated online and is aimed at improving the interaction between users and online products. Thus, this evolution has become a mainstream field of study as scientists seek to understand the implications of audience engagement practices for various sectors of the digital economy. Currently, users devote their attention and time to a limited number of topics and consume information that goes beyond their interests as a synopsis. In such circumstances, new media formats are emerging online. The Internet community has adopted various traditional genres from the classical arts and media, which are constantly evolving into new formats. One such genre that has emerged in recent times is microcinema. The presented study aims to analyze the specific features of a phenomenon, define it, and determine its position in modern media. The authors understand the concept of microcinema as a hybrid genre that emerged at the intersection of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We argue that this genre inherits its roots from classical cinema while embracing new technological advancements and cultural shifts. This study analyzed the ultra-short-length films (N = 180, 2022–2023) nominated at the microcinema festivals. This analysis of the trends in the genre's development revealed the high potential of this genre to solve educational, political, economic, and cultural problems faced by specialists of different profiles, as well as in the search for answers to important philosophical questions.

Keywords: microcinema, short film, microfilm, online video, micro-flicks.

1. Introduction

The prefix "micro" is becoming one of the most significant markers of the digital age. In recent years, the content of the "ultra-compressed" format has been incorporated into all areas related to the exchange of information on screen ecosystems platforms (Hradziushka, 2022; Polyakov, 2022; Urazova, 2019; Urazova et al., 2021; Yakova et al., 2023). Microcinema remains one of the least studied among the many materials of this kind. At the same time, the micro format has been actively researched in relation to, for example, television news (Algavi et al., 2019; Dolgova, Sheptuha, 2023; Hradziushka, 2023; Kemarskaya, 2019; Lazutova et al., 2017; Proskurnova, 2020; Proskurnova et al., 2023; Skvortsova et al., 2023; Volkova, 2019; Volkova et al., 2021).

The academic community has not yet developed a comprehensive and commonly accepted definition of the term microcinema, nor a common understanding of the defining features of this phenomenon. Films of ultra-short duration are conquering the online space, being shown at

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reputable film festivals, attracting the interest of filmmakers, and becoming the focus of attention of specialists who don't relate to the film industry but who use short films to solve professional problems. Thus, the relevance of this study lies in the reasons above.

Most Russian scholars studying the films with a low running time focused on the problems of short films (Ageeva et al., 2016; Bajrakimov, 2016; Dunkevich, Somov, 2020; Fedorov et al., 2022; Litvinev, Proskurnova, 2023; Rodionova, 2021; Zhdankina, Shipulina, 2020); microcinema is not distinguished as an independent phenomenon. Thus, in the last two decades, many European and Chinese scientists have discerned microcinema as a specific phenomenon in the modern era.

The primary aim of this article is to suggest a definition of the concept of "microcinema" and to identify the defining features of contemporary ultra-short films. During our study, we examined the programs of microcinema festivals held in different countries.

The authors propose the following hypotheses:

1. Microcinema is not purely a product of the digital age but a legacy of classical cinema; therefore, it is not correct to associate the term exclusively with online content (the terminological aspect);
2. Microcinema has immense potential in terms of the acquisition of new skills by young filmmakers; promotion of ideas, goods, and services by online users; achievement of various goals by educators in the educational process; presentation of state programs by budgetary institutions; implementation of marketing and PR strategies by private businesses (practical aspect), etc.;
3. Microcinema is a useful tool for both professional and amateur filmmakers, allowing them to broadcast their messages and explore philosophical questions.

2. Materials and methods

As said above, the primary goal in the first stage of our research was a comprehensive view of microcinema. To describe this phenomenon and search for a suitable definition, we used the methods of synthesis and terminological analysis.

The authors studied a corpus of academic and journalistic texts that mention the word "microcinema" and brought together the most widespread opinions about this phenomenon. And as already mentioned above, we weren't able to find a comprehensive and commonly accepted definition of microcinema among scholars worldwide.

Interestingly, the Russian academic community has yet to adopt or acknowledge the concept. However, it is worth noting that local film critics, viewers, and online users actively use the term. Furthermore, the authors of this article found that microcinema schools, educational courses, and creative competitions exist in Russia. The first section of the article outlines the most commonly used words in various countries and provides a clear definition of microcinema. The authors also delve into the reasons behind the selection of these terms, as well as their similarities and differences.

In the second stage of our research, our objective was to ascertain the defining features of contemporary ultra-short films using content analysis. To accomplish this, we scoured the internet for active microcinema festivals and scrutinized the ultra-short films featured on their websites. Our analysis encompassed a total of 180 films produced post-2020 and showcased at seven national and international festivals. This analysis allowed us to compile a comprehensive list of the primary themes explored by microcinema directors in the 21st century. Additionally, we identified the most widely used genres, the duration range of ultra-short films, and the countries where this genre is most prominent.

3. Discussion

Upon conducting an analysis of the defining features of contemporary microcinemas, our initial hypotheses were confirmed. We discovered that ultra-short films, which their creators refer to as "microcinema" rather than "short clips," cannot be regarded as equivalent to online videos in the modern network environment. Rather, they represent a distinct form of audiovisual production that is closely tied to traditional cinema. The techniques employed by the directors of ultra-short films and the themes they choose reveal a strong connection between microcinema and classical cinema, highlighting their unique nature.

The genre of microcinema has gathered attention for its unique approach to addressing life issues that concern humanity throughout its history. Unlike short films, which are primarily created to entertain or inform audiences about current events, microcinema delves into philosophical and abstract themes, provoking viewers to reflect on significant issues. Notably,

the microcinemas nominated at film festivals around the world are recognized for their ability to encourage viewers to engage in profound thought. Rather than serving as a form of relaxation or distraction, microcinema aims to stimulate a search for new solutions and meanings and deepen understanding of various processes. Many authors of short videos driven by financial reasons are deploying means of promoting products, ideas, or services. In contrast to them, microcinema directors prioritize the creation of films that are intellectually and conceptually stimulating rather than placing undue emphasis on commercial viability. This approach enables them to focus exclusively on meaningful and thought-provoking production.

It's worth noting that the topics of microcinema festivals are heavily influenced by ongoing global economic and political processes. This allows us to identify the issues that truly affect people, such as the fear of a major war due to conflicts escalating in multiple regions worldwide, the mass migration resulting from these military clashes, and the unstable financial state of many countries. In these circumstances, people are trying to adapt their lives to a "free digital society" that promotes instant success, a luxurious lifestyle, a certain standard of beauty, and unconditional self-love and total self-acceptance for both adults and teenagers. These topics are becoming increasingly central in a large number of short online videos.

Public institutions can utilize ultra-short films to disseminate new national ideas, showcase social projects, promote healthy lifestyles, and draw attention to the country's problems. Many educators have already adopted this format to achieve various educational goals (Bajrakimov, 2016; Kaneeva, Kozhanova, 2022; Kajzer, Shishkova, 2020; Jwo, 2015). Private companies have also realized the potential of microcinema as a marketing and PR tool (Alekhina et al., 2020; Ageeva et al., 2016). Moreover, microcinema is an effective means for professional filmmakers and amateurs alike to convey existential themes and engage in discussions on philosophical matters. It is evident from the diverse range of themes favored by microcinema creators, organizers, and juries at film festivals.

4. Results

Terminological analysis

It has been discovered that there is a wide range of interpretations for what microcinema means. Different authors have approached the definition of this concept with varying degrees of freedom. For instance, some film critics use the term to describe movies that are shot through the eyepiece of a microscope, where the focus is on microscopic objects such as small insects, dust, and mold (Canales, 2015; Gribova, 2022; Prayuzan et al., 2021). Others propose that some modern music videos that address philosophical, social, intercultural, gender, religious, and other issues can also be considered microcinema (Yurgeneva, 2019). Additionally, some commercials that promote products or services while forming a deep emotional connection with the audience have been referred to as microcinema (Wei, Zhao, 2023, p. 302). There have also been references to the term microcinema when describing compact theaters (Pedrero-Setzer, 2023).

During the study, we discovered that the terms "micro movie" (micromovie, microcinema, micro movie, micro cinema) and "microfilm" (micromovie, microcinema, micro movie, micro cinema) and "microfilm" (microfilm, micro film, micro-short film) are most commonly used to indicate ultra-short films in academic papers, journalistic articles, and texts on educational portals and film festival websites (Alvin, 2007; Chen, 2021; Gilardi et al., 2020; Li, Liu, 2020; Pogue, 2013; Ye, 2012; Zhang, Yuan, 2018; Zhao, 2014). Note that the term "microcinema" is mainly used in works by English-speaking authors. As for the term "microfilm" in English, Russian and Chinese, many authors generally understand it as a significantly reduced reproduction of a handwritten, printed, or graphic document made on a roll of light-sensitive photo or film.

The origin of the emergence of the microcinema genre

Films of ultra-short length, ranging from a few tens of seconds to 5–6 minutes of timing, have been around since the early days of cinematography. However, as the art form developed and technology improved, directors were able to create longer films. Over time, a "short" film was considered a movie, the timing of which could even exceed 60 minutes. Currently, a "short" film can be up to 60 minutes long, with no defined upper limit. The Festival de Cannes accepts films of up to 15 minutes (Festival de Cannes, 2024), while the Oscars and Tribeca festivals have a limit of 40 minutes (Oscars, 2024; Tribeca, 2024). Sundance is one of the few festivals that accepts films up to 49 minutes (Sundance, 2024).

With the advent of smartphones equipped with cameras and social media platforms that provide access to wide audiences, along with the availability of user-friendly editing apps, virtually anyone can now become a filmmaker without formal training. This has led to a trend of creating very short videos that can be consumed quickly and provide viewers with emotional gratification. The emergence of microcinema as a genre is a response to this demand, and, according to our research, it has established itself as a legitimate format in the contemporary film industry.

Speaking of which, many Chinese scholars believe that the microcinema genre originated in China at the beginning of the 21st century. While some scholars view microcinema as a product of the digital age, distributed in the online environment (Chen et al., 2022; Hong, 2011; Zheng, 2011), others identify it as an independent audiovisual genre that inherits traditional cinema (Chen, 2011; Gilardi et al., 2020; Liu, Yan, 2013; Lu, 2023; Meng, 2011; Prayuzan et al., 2021).

Analysis from the modern audiences and filmmakers' perspectives

The scholars who examine microcinema as a fusion of cinema and amateur online content have observed that creators of ultra-short films perceive them as a popular trend. According to Chen (Chen, 2012) these films are rapidly gaining popularity among audiences as "a way to diversify leisure time." In mere moments, one can "experience a visual feast" akin to an "afternoon tea," while full-length movies are treated as a culinary experience with "three Michelin stars" (Lu, 2023: 1166).

In addition, a pivotal feature of microcinema is its unconventional composition. Usually, in short and feature-length films, directors follow a narrative that takes the viewer along the classic path of "beginning – development – climax – end." But in ultra-short films, the climax is "positioned right at the start." (Lu, 2023: 1166). The emotional component in such films is super-concentrated.

From the communication theory perspective, some authors consider microcinema "a relevant means of fixating, preserving, and popularizing cultural values." (Chen, 2012). The fact that ultra-short films provoke the viewer to display vivid emotions suggests that microcinema is an effective tool that can "teach you to think" about significant aspects of life (Lu, 2023: 1166).

Microcinema has several advantages over a full-length movie. Among the first are the low financial costs. You don't have to invest too much money to write a complex script, for a cast of actors, or for promotion. The production process is much cheaper; microcinema is often shot not with expensive professional equipment but with a smartphone.

Nonetheless, would be appropriate to acknowledge the limitations of microcinema. Its presentation in theaters or film festivals is a challenge, and viewers may find it arduous to fully absorb each brief film. Typically, these works are viewed on digital platforms, where they are rapidly consumed and passed over. Perhaps it is the pervasive culture of rapid information consumption that hinders the genre's recognition and acceptance.

Practical aspect: the defining features of microcinema

According to our study, microcinema festivals have been taking place in various countries since the 2000s. Today, there are several dozens of these festivals, indicating the growing popularity of this genre among both professional and amateur filmmakers.

Through an analysis of microcinema festival programs from around the globe, we discovered a diverse range of nominated films spanning fiction, non-fiction, animation, features, documentaries, and even photo series presented in a cinematic format. Our team delved into the winners of different categories in 2022 and 2023 (Table 1), meticulously examining each sample for its content and duration.

The time length of the 180 films we analyzed ranges from 40 seconds to 30 minutes. However, it is worth noting that the timing of most of the films from the total number of movies viewed (75 %) is less than 6 minutes.

The films primarily focus on a few general themes. These include 1) an individual's overcoming psychological difficulties; 2) the environmental protection issues; 3) the challenges faced by migrants in foreign countries; 4) an individual's realizing as a part of the universe and searching for the meaning of existence; 5) life during wartime; and 6) people with disabilities are coping with challenges.

Based on our study, most contemporary microcinema festivals do not impose any restrictions on the topics that filmmakers can explore. However, in some cases, a list of *suggested* topics is provided to participants. The TURI Film Festival (Turi..., 2023), for instance, encourages filmmakers to create works focused on themes such as unemployment, parental issues, child labor,

women's lives in rural areas, social media, healthcare, the environment, work-life balance, as well as the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Table 1. Microcinemas presented at festivals in different countries (N=180)

Name of the microcinema festival	The number of films (winners / nominees) available on the official website of the festival	The runtime range of films	Themes in films
The Spark micro-short film fest, *founded in 2019 (USA, 2023) (Spark, 2023)	4 (winners)	1:15-8:00	Escape from war, life in war, life of a child with a congenital disease, transformation of the village in the modern world
Austin film festival, *founded in 2003 (USA, July, 2023) (Austin, 2023)	42 (winners)	0:49-6:00	Overcoming fears and challenges in life, values of the age of mass consumption, living in homes, protecting the environment, family relationships, loving relationships, mental health care, living with disabilities, thinking about the place of the human being in the universe, fairy tale motifs, the meaning of fashion, breaking up with someone you don't love, the creation phenomenon, overcoming unforeseen circumstances, friendship, trying to get away with it, adolescent issues, working in the arts, life as an outcast, people with disabilities.
Fronteras micro film festival, *founded in 2023 (USA, June, 2023) (Fronteras, 2023)	21 (participating films)	0:28-4:55	Problems of illegal migrants, intergenerational relations, xenophobia, separation process with family, problems of sexual minorities, memories of the past, reflections on human life, peculiarities of national culture, showing kindness and care, xenophobia, prisoners' dreams of freedom.
Micro μ festival, *founded in 2011 (Greece, Oct., 2023) (Micro μ, 2023)	15 (participating films)	1:12 - 23:00	The price of life, lies and their consequences, overcoming obstacles to love, pursuing dreams through hardship, the struggle of a rigid state system with the freedom of citizens, observing the lives of people in one city, memories of a life lived, the vulnerability of women, the joy of adventure on the road, supporting comrades in war, the difficulties of life in exile, trying to keep in memory a loved one who has passed away, the search for the edges of reason.

Name of the microcinema festival	The number of films (winners / nominees) available on the official website of the festival	The runtime range of films	Themes in films
Under 5 Minute Film Festival, *founded in 2016 (USA, December 2023) (Under..., 2023)	67 (winners)	1:00 - 5:04	Living by one's own rules, overcoming fears, mutual aid, subculture, transience of time, lost love, living under illusions, unattainable dreams, friendship, search for meaning of life, impact of artificial intelligence technology on human consciousness, power of female friendship, climate change, overcoming one's own anxieties, pleasure from fear, two sides of the same person, beauty of nature, experiencing the loss of a child, refugee issues, protecting the oceans, fashion, boundaries of fear, bullying in school, transience of life, living with failure, perception of the world's future, and the future.
Swallow film festival, founded in 2020 (international) (Swallow, 2023)	9 (winners)	0:40 - 30:00	A life of a low ranker, the price of human life, the creation killing the creator, the obstacles to friendship, the lives of people with disabilities, a human life on another planet in the future, memories of vacations in the countryside.
Supershorts, London (2023, UK, USA) (Supershorts, 2023)	22 (winners)	01:10 - 25:45	The impact of artificial intelligence on the perception of life, the clash of cultures, the destructive power of war, the power of beauty, how chronic illness can make a person better, dealing with guilt, the process of making a difficult decision, the beauty of nature, sacrificing oneself for a loved one, loss and finding meaning in life, transgender life, the unifying power of art, living with bipolar disorder, folk myths and legends, circus art, the world of hobbies, the beauty of nature.

The growing number of festivals held nationwide in the United States and dedicated to microcinema demonstrates the popularity of this genre in the country. Interest in microcinema is growing in other parts of the globe, including the Asia-Pacific region, Australia, Europe, and Russia, where filmmakers have the opportunity to participate in ultra-short film contest programs. However, currently, there are only a limited number of contests available in these regions for this type of film.

5. Conclusion

Thus, our study established that microcinema is a unique genre that is set to thrive in the foreseeable future. With the emergence of accessible and user-friendly modern techniques, a new wave of filmmakers and professionals will have ample opportunities to perfect their craft, express their individual styles, and create thought-provoking ultra-short films that tackle a wide range of topics. The adaptability and versatility of microcinema as a medium allow it to remain impactful and relevant in today's ever-changing media landscape. So based on these findings, it is safe to say

that microcinema will continue to evolve, with a new generation of skilled professionals utilizing modern techniques to create meaningful work that serves a variety of purposes.

Research limitations

The authors encountered several challenges while conducting their investigation into microcinema festivals online. Despite discovering over 30 festival programs that could potentially be included in the empirical basis of the study, we were able to analyze only a few of them. Most of those festival websites were poorly designed and lacked crucial data, such as films or trailer files, or at least links to third-party resources where they are uploaded, and even the directors' names and full titles of their films. The festival websites mostly provided general information on the event, author requirements, and movie release schedules for nominated years. In some instances, the websites featured only one screenshot picture per film, a poster, or the filmmaker's name. Despite these limitations, the authors attempted to locate the specified videos on hosting sites or search engines, but their efforts were largely unsuccessful.

On a number of occasions, the festival teams present on their website the films (or at least the links to) of all nominees. In others, festivals' website administrators limit their content to the winners' films. In this regard, we decided to work with accessible material and not include references to "participating films" and "winners" in the table.

Initially, the authors intended to examine samples of microcinema presented on social networks. However, during our study, we had to abandon the idea for several reasons. With the hashtag "microcinema" (taking into account all English-language translations), one can find countless videos that are almost impossible to identify as the genre we are interested in. Many users who have specified this hashtag do not have in mind the concept that has become the focus of this article.

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