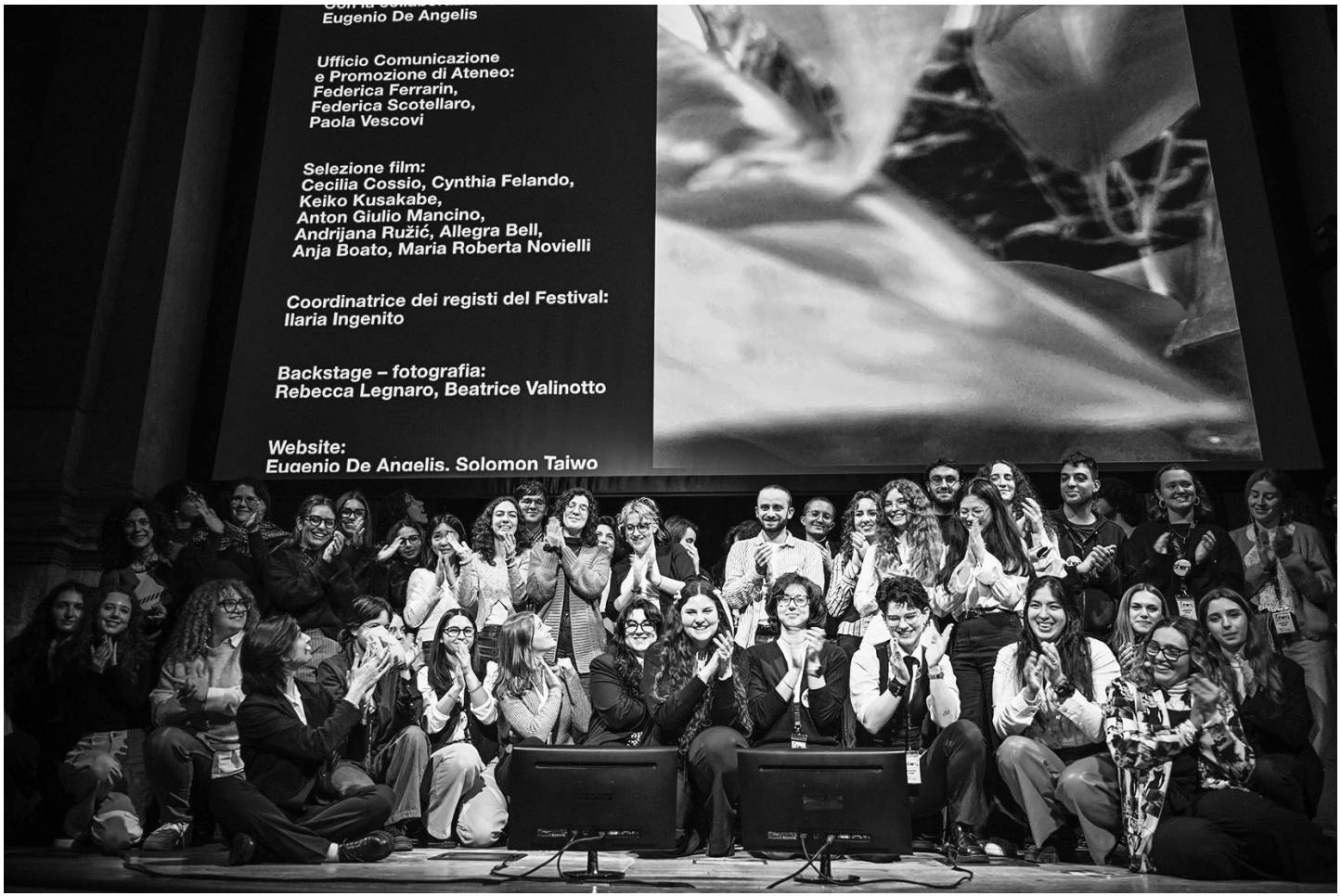


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# Short Films, Film Schools, and Student Film Festivals

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This article considers the importance of film schools and short film festivals, including those that feature student films, starting in the 1940s and 1950s, and their continuing legacy today.

Focusing primarily on the United States, several historical issues related to the production and exhibition of shorts are considered, including the impact of the forced end of studio-based vertical integration, the demise of the studio system and the shuttering of many short film units, and the post-studio era proliferation of film schools and courses that brought new life and possibilities to short films. Interestingly, although the short film tends to be subservient to the feature-length film in the United States, several Western and Eastern European countries have a history of supporting and otherwise honoring the form. In terms of today's shorts landscape, Cooper and Dancyger observe the difference as follows:

> The short, at least in North America, is more and more an economic necessity for the student filmmaker and the novice professional […] In Europe, however, the short film remains a viable form of expression, one supported in large part by cultural ministries. Magazines devoted to short films as well as festivals devoted exclusively to the form assure, at least for the medium term, that it will continue to thrive. (2005, 3)

Despite the increasing visibility of shorts, including on streaming sites, the short film continues to be less valued in the United States, at least by the film industry. Not surprisingly perhaps, the highest profile shorts-only festivals are both in Europe – Clermont-Ferrand in France, and Oberhausen in Germany.

## The Demise of Studio Shorts

Several factors contributed to the demise of the major studios' short film production units, starting in the late 1940s, including the end of vertical integration, competition from television, and vastly reduced box office profits. The most significant setback for short films was in 1948, when the United States Supreme Court issued its landmark Paramount decree, which concluded the major studios had violated antitrust laws because they not only produced films, they also distributed them, including in their extensive theatre chains. The decree forced the majors to end their practices of vertical integration and marked the beginning of the end for the studio system. As a result, the studios decided to liquidate their least profitable operations: the theatre chains. The effects on short filmmaking and exhibition were immense as the studios at first dramatically reduced the numbers of shorts (and features) they produced and, by the late 1950s, had ended the production of in-house live-action fiction shorts entirely (Schatz 1983, 169-71). Columbia Pictures, for example, despite the decades-long profits and popularity of its shorts, ended its series production in 1956, and shuttered its shorts unit entirely in 1959. Likewise, Warner Bros. stopped producing live-action shorts in 1956 (though it continued to make animated shorts until 1969) (Gomery 1986, 171, 121).

In terms of short film exhibition, the formerly standardized practice of screening shorts before a feature-length program was declining by the early 1950s, with both long term and wide-ranging repercussions. Looking back from a 1967 vantage point, Derrick Knight and Vincent Porter recalled the impact the Paramount decree had in England:

> Rumour had it that theatrical short filmmaking was now virtually non-existent. … Now [in 1967] that production is divorced from exhibition, the market for short films in the U.S.A. is minimal. Whatever the benefits of preventing vertical integration within the industry may be, this form of legislation alone is of very little benefit to the short film maker. The feature film is the main attraction in the cinema. (Knight, Porter 1967, 55-6)

When the major Hollywood studios began closing their shorts units, short film production increasingly moved to the realms of independent filmmaking and film schools. At the same time, shorts increasingly found favor at film festivals and in 16mm distribution markets. Without the time constraints of theatrical screenings on short films, in order to accommodate the features in a full program, the range of running times for narrative shorts expanded considerably. In addition, shorts began to register the influence of avant-garde films (which also were usually short) and to anticipate important trends, such as the European New Wave film movements. Due to these and other developments, the late 1950s and 1960s proved to be an era of impressive change and renewal for the short film.

## Film Schools and Shorts

In 1947, the trade journal *Hollywood Quarterly* quoted a prediction made by Will Hays, head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, about the influence he predicted universities would likely have on filmmaking in the future: "Recognition of the motion picture as an art by the great universities [will mark] the

beginning of a new day in motion picture work. It [will pave] the way for the motion picture's Shakespeares" (Fulton 1947-48, 201). Hays's prediction came true in the post-studio era, when several film schools were founded in the United States. It proved to be one of the most significant developments in short film history, as making their own shorts became an essential component of the curriculum for student filmmakers. The institutions that inaugurated film programs include the University of California, Los Angeles's (UCLA) film school, founded in 1947; Northwestern University's in 1956; and, in 1965, film programs were launched at New York University's (NYU) Tisch School of the Arts and Columbia University. The proliferation of film schools and programs took place on a global level too (Petrie 2010, 31). Nationally and internationally, students flocked to the new film schools and programs and shorts enjoyed a boost as thousands of student films were made, several of which found success off-campus.

In 2010, in a much-needed addition to film and media studies, Duncan Petrie addressed the historical importance of the new film programs. As he notes, after the dismantling of the studio system in the United States, film schools took the lead in training new filmmakers:

> The move from a model of in-house factory production to a more diffuse system of one-off projects created the opportunity for university [programs] to assume an enhanced role as the training ground for aspiring feature film-makers. (Petrie 2010, 37)

Likewise, the film critic Emanual Levy observed that: "When the studio system, previously the de facto academy for filmmakers, was disintegrating, schools began to fill the void" (2001, 35). By the late-1960s and early 1970s, several film-school-educated directors who were associated with 'new Hollywood cinema', like Martin Scorsese (NYU), George Lucas (University of Southern California/USC), and Charles Burnette (UCLA), had achieved success as feature-length filmmakers, and critics often addressed the importance of their student shorts in their careers and their differences (in training) from their studio predecessors. Levy, for example, argues that film schools became "a powerful force for rejuvenating Hollywood" (Schatz 1983, 203-4; Petrie 2010; Levy 2001, 35). They were also a powerful force for rejuvenating the short film.

Starting in the mid-1960s, there was significant attention in the mainstream press to film students and their contributions to film culture. At least a few writers were inspired to use the term "explosion" to register their impressions of the growth in film schools and students. In 1968, for example, *Time* magazine observed the recent increases in student filmmakers and singled out the programs at USC, UCLA, and NYU as exceptional – for turning out graduates with the skills to make films of "professional quality", which they demonstrated in their short films (*Time* 1968, 80-2). There were even a few observers who confessed to being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of shorts produced by students. In 1966, *Film Quarterly*'s Jackson Burgess bemoaned the critic's inability to stay on top of student shorts, because in "the past two or three years, [the volume is] so large that nobody can keep up with it, not even the professors". Nevertheless, Burgess was an advocate who supported student filmmakers, saying their shorts had value and "deserve to be taken seriously"(Burgess 1966: 29). In 1973, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences did just that, by inaugurating the Student Academy Awards in order "to support and encourage excellence in filmmaking at the collegiate level". The first awards ceremony, held in December 1973, was a high-profile event hosted by the legendary Hollywood actor Jack Lemmon.

Further evidence of the serious attention student films and filmmakers received at the time is provided by a 1970

monograph, *Films on the Campus* – a survey of sixteen university film programs in the United States. According to the author, Thomas Fensch, his efforts were inspired by the "explosion in film interest on the nation's campuses", which he predicted would "not only continue, but increase, in the coming months and years". In his aim to provide an understanding of "the student film world as it exists today", he conducted extensive campus interviews with students and faculty, and watched over five hundred student films (Fensch 1970, 19-22). Although its attention to the individual schools is somewhat idiosyncratic, *Films on the Campus* is fascinating for Fensch's discussions of several student films he suggested were indicative of the preferred pedagogical approaches and filmmaking trends at each of the schools. Fensch was especially interested in the students and shorts that had found success by screening and winning awards at off-campus film festivals, and he commended USC's and UCLA's faculty for encouraging students to submit their work to them (Fensch 1970, 31, 76). Of course, the schools also benefitted as festival awards brought prestige to them as well as their students. Fensch singled out George Lucas and his legendary thesis short *Electronic Labyrinth THX 1138 4EB* (1967) for special praise, and included both in his chapter title, "The University of Southern California: The Crew Concept; Lucas and *THX*". Characterizing Lucas as one of USC's "finest" graduates, Fensch provided biographical information about his educational trajectory, along with a fairly detailed production history of *Labyrinth*, which he praised as "the best student science-fiction film ever made". As evidence, he cited several of Lucas's festival awards, including from the National Student Film Festival, the Edinburgh International Film Festival, and the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen. He further noted that *Labyrinth* had been well received at several university and other non-theatrical venues, was reviewed in *Time* magazine, had become renowned among student filmmakers inspired by its success, and that Lucas was adapting it for the more simply but still enigmatically titled feature-length film *THX 1138* (1971) (Fensch 1970, 52-6).

The widespread fascination with student shorts in the 1960s is also suggested by the many important screening opportunities held at on- and off-campus events. At UCLA, public showcases of student shorts were publicized and reviewed by the local press and attracted capacity crowds to the campus's 1800-seat Royce Hall. Likewise, the Ann Arbor Film Festival was a prestigious event for student filmmakers because it provided the added benefit of a touring program of award-winning shorts that screened at universities, other film festivals, and theatrically at some city venues (Fensch 1970, 65, 211-12). The competitive National Student Film Festival was a particularly high-profile event. Inaugurated in 1965, it was co-sponsored by the Motion Picture Association of America, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and the U.S. National Student Association. *Film Quarterly*'s reviewer cited the festival as evidence that "many new young artists on campuses around the country are making sharp, carefully edited films full of special effects and full of determination to avoid clichés" (Shatnoff 1967: 73). The festival achieved a higher profile in 1968, when its award-winning shorts enjoyed additional festival exposure, including at Oberhausen. Other prestigious venues and awards for student shorts included the Producers Guild of America's Intercollegiate Awards, the International Student Film Festival in Amsterdam, and NYU's annual Haig Manoogian Screening, held in Los Angeles.

Film students at international universities whose films had screened at film festivals received considerable press attention during the 1960s and 1970s, including about their school's curricula and specific requirements. A case study is provided by Roman Polanski's history as a film student at Poland's Lodz Film School, which is routinely cited in discussions of his career. It's also a subject that Polanski has addressed. In a lengthy profile in *The New*

*York Times*, Polanski praised the rigor and intensity of his university's curriculum, saying: "The schooling is amazingly thorough [...] By the time you finish, you are making your own short films" (Weinraub 1971). In his autobiography, he carefully delineated the production requirements as follows:

> In the course of their five years student directors were required to make at least two one-minute silent shorts, a ten- or fifteen-minute documentary, a dramatized film of the same length, and, finally, a 'diploma' film that could run for even longer. Opportunities for further filmmaking were almost limitless, however. (Polanski 1984, 123)

Due perhaps to his early acclaim as a student filmmaker, Polanski's shorts are among the best known in film history. He completed several, both as a student and early in his professional career – before and after his highly regarded feature-length film *Knife in the Water* (1962) – including *Breaking Up the Dance* (1957), *When Angels Fall* (1959), *The Fat and the Lean* (1961), and *Mammals* (1962). Not surprisingly, the most often addressed title is his first award-winning student short *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (discussed below). In several different *New York Times* articles, for example, *Two Men* is cited as evidence of the director's early success and recurring interest in, as one journalist's profile put it, "the inconsequentialities, the non sequiturs, the essential absurdity, [and] the madness of existence" (Higham 1973). Unlike many successful feature-length film directors, Polanski has often spoken about his own short films, and in considerable detail. In the States, perhaps the only director to share Polanski's appreciation of his own short films, is Martin Scorsese.

## Film Festivals and Shorts

Like college and university film courses and programs, the significance of film festivals to short films after the end of the studio system cannot be overestimated.

Starting in the 1950s, film festivals showcased and provided important alternatives to regular theatrical screenings for shorts. Several international events invited and celebrated them, including the Cannes Film Festival, which presented the first award for the best short film in 1952. Also, in addition to short film screenings at features-oriented events, several important shorts-only festivals were founded. The world's oldest short film festival, Germany's International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, held its first edition in 1954. Still considered one of the preeminent short film venues, it was founded with the mandate to provide an alternative to the "standardized film products appearing in commercial cinemas" (Fehrenbach 1995, 232).[1] Toward that end, it soon earned a reputation for programming ambitious "ideologically and aesthetically diverse" shorts that elicited passionate debate and admiration from film enthusiasts and filmmakers (Cowie 2004, 119). The festival's reach and significance to aspiring and student filmmakers was confirmed in 1962 when a group of young German radicals and would-be filmmakers delivered their *Oberhausen Manifesto* during the event, and declared: "The old film is dead. We believe in the new one". They specifically acknowledged their commitment to the short form because they had been inspired by the films they'd

**1** Oberhausen was founded as the West German Educational Film Festival; in 1959 it was renamed the West German Short Film Festival; and in 1991, it was given its current name, the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen.

seen at Oberhausen, which reflected the new trends and styles of non-German filmmakers associated with the European new waves, including several who had been film students, like Alain Resnais and Roman Polanski, or film critics, like François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard (Fehrenbach 1995: 223-25). The International Festival of Short Films at Tours (in France) was inaugurated in 1956 and soon became a high-profile event, which Jean-Luc Godard made it a point to attend and write about as part of his critic's duties for *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

It was also festivals that launched Roman Polanski's high-profile reputation, when his offbeat and now-legendary student short, *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958), enjoyed successful screenings. After winning the bronze medal at the Brussels World Fair, *Two Men* screened at Oberhausen where it won an Honorable Mention award, and at the San Francisco International Film Festival where it won the Golden Gate Award. Further, as Polanski recalled in his autobiography, it was the first student short to be commercially released in Poland (Polanski 1984, 149).

Since the 1980s, short films have benefited from the global proliferation of film festivals, both those dedicated exclusively to shorts and the features-oriented events that include programs of shorts, like Cannes and Sundance. Today, the online festival submission site Withoutabox lists 359 online and on-site shorts-only festivals. The two most prestigious shorts-only festivals are Oberhausen and France's Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, which became a competitive event in 1982. Oberhausen focuses both on new international works (including competitive programs), in addition to shorts from throughout cinema history, which are screened in themed programs, retrospectives, profiles of individual filmmakers and film institutions (such as film schools and production companies), and guest-curated events. Clermont-Ferrand, like Oberhausen, features both old and new titles, along with special profiles, showcases, retrospectives, and panels and seminars.

## Ca' Foscari Short Film Festival Tribute: 2011 to 2025

For fifteen years, starting in 2011, the Ca' Foscari Short Film Festival soon became an internationally recognized event whose mission was to showcase and celebrate short films made by student filmmakers from around the world. Founded by the festival's director, Professor Maria Roberta Novielli, its success as a viable short film platform with an international reach (including over 3,000 submissions for the 2025 edition) are noteworthy. Until it ceased operations, the festival was unique among global student festivals. That is, although it followed the organizational strategies of other international festivals, it did so with an important difference: the four-day event was run almost entirely by students, and it provided important professional-level experiences to its hundreds of student volunteers.

Owing, in part, to the high number of student works submitted for selection, the quality of the films invited to screen was very high each year, which contributed to its exceptional success and growth over the years. Also noteworthy is the success that student filmmakers experienced after their work screened successfully at the festival; for example, three of the Ca' Foscari competition films were semi-finalists at the Student Academy Awards; one of them, the Austrian short *Invisible Border* (Mark Gerstorger 2022), a Grand Prix winner at the festival, won the Oscar for Best Narrative Short.

Nicknamed the 'Short', the Ca' Foscari Short Film Festival arguably became the most important university-centered festival in Italy. Each year in March, the Short took place at the prestigious Ca' Foscari University of Venice, located in the heart of the city. The main contest consisted of

thirty short films made by students from film schools and universities around the world. The submissions were enormously varied, and included the general categories: fiction, animation, documentary, and experimental. Festival director, Novielli, believed it was essential not to prioritize one or another category or genre in order to discourage the unfortunate hierarchy whereby fiction shorts are favored over animated and experimental ones, which are often relegated to second-class status at other events. In addition, to showcase the widest range of international productions and to give visibility to the most diverse cultures, the festival did not program more than two films from any country in the competition section. During its long run, the festival's contributions to short film culture and to supporting student filmmakers were extensive. Hopefully, the festival will return in some capacity in the near future.

## Student Shorts and Auteur Filmmakers

A few live-action student short films, mostly from the period of the 1950s and 1960s, are described below. Made by student filmmakers who have since become recognized as auteurs, the descriptions include a bit of contextual information. Arguably, the period qualifies as a 'golden age' of short film production, and even this small collection of titles gives a sense of their inventiveness and range of creativity – and demonstrates the strength of student shorts and the importance of film festivals for showcasing them.

### *Electronic Labyrinth THX 1138 4EB* (1967)

As mentioned above, *Electronic Labyrinth* fulfilled Lucas's MA thesis requirements and followed the several short films he made as an undergraduate student at USC. The undergraduate curriculum had enabled him to learn all aspects of filmmaking – from writing, to shooting, editing, and directing, which accounts for why he referred to himself a 'filmmaker' rather than a 'director'. The now legendary, canonical short *Electronic Labyrinth* won several awards and favorable press reviews, and its high profile and success inspired film students around the world, with Lucas becoming legendary among aspiring filmmakers, including his fellow students at USC.

A science fiction film with strong avant garde impulses, *Electronic Labyrinth*'s story and imagery evoke a futuristic dystopia, very much like Aldous Huxley's novel, *Brave New World*. *Electronic Labyrinth*'s story is very simple: a man named 1,138 fights for a chance at freedom, by escaping the futuristic hell of surveillance and control that surrounds him. The simple story is dynamically realized with complex and, at times, quite hectic imagery and editing rhythms. It is also very much like an art film with bold, often abstract and painterly imagery, including the enlarged grain of video-screens, highly overexposed images, and odd, disconcerting framings and superimpositions. In addition, the chase scene at the end, when 1,138 finally manages to flee, is effectively choreographed and suspenseful, as he moves through a dizzying maze of corridors and enclosed spaces, while being 'chased' electronically, by pursuers following him on their computer screens, which reflects the film's emphasis on surveillance and the motif of cameras that pry into people's private and public lives. *Electronic Labyrinth* is one of the best-known student short films ever.

*It's Not Just You, Murray!* (Martin Scorsese, 1964, 15 minutes)

Martin Scorsese's well-known student film, *Murray* is an ambitious genre-blending comedy art short that won a festival award in San Francisco and was honored at the National Student Film Festival. Shot on location in New York City's Little Italy, it combines and parodies gangster and musical conventions in its portrait of Murray, a middle-aged, mid-level gangster who's very proud of his success; as he explains, in direct address: "I'm very rich and very influential and very well liked". But he's perhaps more proud of his long-term relationship with his best friend, Joe. *Murray* turns on a comic irony, in which what Murray says about Joe's loyalty in the foreground is revealed to be false by what Joe's doing in the background – including his seduction of Murray's wife. As Murray nostalgically recalls his rise from bootlegger to racketeer, his journey to the American dream includes low points, such as jail time and on-the-job injuries, and high points, like the production of a Busby Berkeley style stage show. Despite its short running time, *Murray* has a complex story and structure that includes flashbacks and several locations.

*Several Friends* (Charles Burnett, 1969, 22 minutes)

Charles Burnett, the legendary UCLA film school graduate, made *Several Friends* as a student. With a simple, slice-of-life story, its episodic scenario follows a few African-American young men during one day in their south Los Angeles, California neighborhood, as they drive around, watch a fight, buy a chicken, move a washer, work on a car, and meet the white girlfriend of one of their crew. At the end of the day, despite their plans to go to a party in nearby Hollywood, three of the guys have spent the night hanging out drinking in the kitchen instead. Very neorealist, fiercely authentic, and seemingly improvised quite a bit of the time, it provides a fascinating portrait of three young men, with tons of chemistry, during an aimless day.

*Tramway/Tramwaj* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1966, 5 minutes)

A student film made while Kieslowski was attending the esteemed Polish Film and Television School, it is entirely silent. It features a young man who watches a pretty young woman dance in a club, and sees her later on the tram. He catches her eye and seems to amuse her with his expressions and silly pantomimes, but he does not speak to her before disembarking. As it drives away, in a fantastic long duration shot, the tram seems to pivot around the young man, centered in the frame, as he watches and then tries to run after it. A missed-opportunity scenario, it has a unique combination of lighter moments and darkness – and, perhaps, pessimism.

*Two Men and a Wardrobe* (Roman Polanski, 1958, 15 minutes)

Polanski wrote, directed, and played a small role as a street thug in the black and white, dialogue-free film, shot entirely on location. A fish-out-of-water tale, *Two Men* features a pair of happy young men who inexplicably emerge from the sea while carrying a full-size wardrobe. As they delight in their arrival on shore, they mug and

dance around a bit in silent-comedy fashion, after which they embark upon a sojourn through the local town. Their odd object is an unwelcome distraction to the authorities and townspeople everywhere they go – in a streetcar, cafe, and hotel. As their journey continues, they endure increasing hostility and violence from the locals – and what they witness is even worse. In the end, the two lonely, outcast men and their wardrobe return to the sea and an uncertain future. *Two Men* is Polanski's most famous short film.

*An Exercise in Discipline: Peel* (Jane Campion,1982, 10 minutes)

Made while she was a student at the Australian Film Television and Radio School, Campion's now canonical film was invited to screen at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Palme d'Or award for Short Film. *Peel* features issues and visual strategies that Campion continued to develop in her feature films, and which are associated with her auteur preoccupations, including family dysfunction and odd relationship tensions. The story concerns adult Tim Pye and his son Ben, who are on an automobile road trip with his sister Katie. Primary focus is upon the duel between the father and son, especially when Ben tosses his orange peel out of the car's window, whereupon Tim stops and insists that Ben pick it up. There is immediate tension, because Tim's response is so irrational and vicious. As Ben leaves, Tim's sister watches, apparently confused. Things further devolve when father and son demand that Katie retrieve the peels that she's thrown away too.