

Short Circuits

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Flash Back!

Occasional Illuminations from Birkbeck Arts Week

Zara Dinnen & Tony Venezia



ON THE EVENING of Tuesday 24th May 2011, the Contemporary Fiction Seminar held a *Flash Symposium* at Birkbeck's School of Arts, 43 Gordon Square.

The symposium sought to stage a momentary deliberation on, and response to, shortness. In essence we hoped the symposium would execute a pause, an opportunity to reflect on the various entangled objects that constitute short forms.

We seemed to stumble onto topicality, more by accident than design. Shortly after the symposium, BBC Radio 4 announced it would be cutting its broadcast output of short fiction.¹ The literary validity of the short story is, perhaps, undermined by such a policy when it is implemented by institutional gatekeepers of cultural value like the BBC. And yet, there is much evidence to

contradict any doomsayers. In her introduction to *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, Aisla Cox suggests:

[T]he short story's adaptability has always helped it survive through grassroots initiatives, small presses, magazines and writers' groups. Nowadays we can exploit new types of transmission; as a compact form, short fiction lends itself particularly well to online publication and promotion. Independent publishers, small magazines and bloggers have built an ever-expanding community, using Internet technology to enhance the accessibility and the immediacy of the genre. The ancient origins of storytelling in oral tradition are revisited in live events, facilitated by publicity on Facebook, e-mail and Twitter. Word of mouth spreads faster than ever.²

Cox's compressed and illuminating editorial brings together the multifarious aspects of the short story's appeal, while unwittingly revealing a commonplace limitation in criticism of the form. This is manifest in the desire to compact the contemporary with the timeless, constructing an over-coherent genealogy tying short stories to ancient storytelling in an effort to overcome some vaguely diagnosed status anxiety.

The idea that short stories are ignored or undervalued crept into our initial copy, and then, with no intentionality that either of us can recall, focus shifted from short *fiction* to *shortness* itself. With our speakers we became less interested in the ancient origins of storytelling and more in contemporary mediations and remediations. The speakers performed short papers; they used the restrictions on time to enact engaging, quick-witted, and necessarily porous readings of their short subjects.

These bracing exercises in brevity formed the first half of the evening's programme: five five-minute papers from University of London research students, published in this issue of *Dandelion*. The papers were divergent in subject but surprising and unexpected commonalities revealed themselves. Matt Sangster's brief exposition of the primordial 'once upon a time' deftly positioned the figure of the active reader as a key device in the affective narrative strategies that mark short form writing, especially in genre fiction. The reader-as-author and the often unanticipated outcomes of surreal humour were also at the centre of Daniel Rourke's paper on animated GIFs: viewers of culture become producers of shorts with material recycled and being made to speak, sometimes literally, in punchlines and soundbites. These topics re-emerged in Ernesto Priego's paper on the material dimensions of Web comics. Ernesto established strong links between the general expectations of short form fiction and the way the cuts of the comic strip can be made to play along, strikingly, in the context of online attention deficit. Humour and indeterminacy prevailed in Henderson Downing's paper on 'a little pamphlet bought from a pop-up shop on Redchurch Street in December 2010 on the shortest day of the year'; a short paper with a pleasingly long title. Temporal tensions were foregrounded in Henderson's discussion of the real time digitally-mediated communication of an art work entirely defined by its insistent duration; the non-stop twenty-four hour cycle of Christian Marclay's *The Clock*. And in a related visual-textual discourse, Holly Pester's paper looked at examples of concrete poems that use systems of graphic representation as

textual short hand. Images of imaged-texts punctuated Holly's verbal presentation, to demonstrable effect.

The second half of the symposium was a panel discussion of the short form with writer Geoff Ryman, film-maker Andy Poyiadgi, writer Heidi James, and comics artist Tom Humberstone, chaired by Ariel Khan.³

Shortness, it seems, is never only about mere length, brevity, or compression, it always leads to something else. Like the surprising links that emerged from the performances of the short papers, more links, leads even, surfaced through the panel discussion. Perhaps most immediately apparent, the anthological practice inherent in Geoff Ryman's hypertext novel *253* and the satisfying, and unintended, symmetry with Tom Humberstone's forthcoming comic constructed from linked short stories, *Ellipsis*.

The format of short papers on short things seemed to offer an expansive response to such a multifaceted cultural resource. The accumulative and collective aspects of these papers have in turn rearticulated the processual relationship between part and whole. Walter Benjamin, a common point of reference, aphoristically captures a sense of this. For Benjamin, in assembling 'large-scale constructions out of the smallest most precisely cut components', we may hope to reveal, in each collected moment, 'the crystal of the total event.'⁴ By curating and collecting these flashes we offer five occasional illuminations.

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Notes

¹ See Rob Sharp, 'Outcry as Radio 4 stops broadcasting short stories', *Independent* 19 July 2011 [<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/outcry-as-radio-4-stops-broadcasting-short-stories-2315888.html>] [Accessed 20 July 2011].

² Ailsa Cox, 'Editorial', *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice* 1.1 (2011), 3-5 (3).

³ Unfortunately we cannot include their discussion here but please follow the links to their works for further mediation on the short form.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), N2, 6.