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Between chaos and control: improvisation in the screen production process

Abstract:

This paper will examine the role of improvisation within the screen production process. There is nothing new about improvised acting in film. It has a significant but relatively minor position in the history of screen drama. The prevalence of improvisation is arguably increasing in an era where the costs of filming are reducing, which previously was a strong disincentive to take the looser, less controlled approach of shooting unscripted dialogue and action. Through looking at the recent production of a film drama where unscripted dialogue was used, it will be argued that approaches that more explicitly engage with concepts of improvisation offer both risks and possibilities for the creative process of screen production. The relevance of the theories of M.M. Bakhtin around the concept of the dialogic will be considered in relation to developing a better understanding of the qualities that distinguish improvised performances from scripted ones. In this discussion, reference will be made to performance theory and discussions about improvisation in theatre (Schechner, 1988) and in jazz music (Soules, 2004). The paper will highlight tensions in the screen production process between improvised performances and accepted modes of production, which are often premised on concepts of control developed in the early years of the Hollywood film industry and widely applied throughout the screen production field. The paper will also discuss attempts to more broadly structure a production around the concept of improvisation, which has significant implications for both the way a film is shot and the nature of the story being told.

Biographical note:

Leo Berkeley is the Associate Dean (Media, Journalism, Screen & Music) within the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. He also has considerable experience as an independent filmmaker, having written and directed the feature film, *Holidays on the River Yarra*, which was an official selection for the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. More recently he has developed an interest in a new media form called 'machinima'. A machinima work he produced, *Ending With Andre*, screened at the 2005 Machinima Film Festival in New York. In 2008 he also made a micro-budget feature film called *How To Change The World*.

Keywords:

Improvisation – Screen – Production – Film – Filmmaking – Performance

Introduction

When filmmakers measure their films against their experience of the world they often find them lacking. What has been referred to as a crisis of representation in a broad spectrum of human studies has resulted from just such a sense of discrepancy between experience and the existing paradigms for representing it. (MacDougall 1998: 214)

The trajectory of my career as a filmmaker has been towards an increasing use of improvisation. As expressed by MacDougall (1998) in the quotation above, I believe one of the main reasons for this is my realisation that the scripted and controlled screen drama I have produced has felt inadequate in capturing human behaviour in respects that are important to me. Early significant influences on my developing ideas as a filmmaker, such as Robert Altman and Jacques Rivette, used improvised performances as a central element in their directorial styles (Wexman 1980). As a film viewer, there were qualities in these performances that seemed distinct from those that were determined by a more structured and composed script. However, I was never able to clearly articulate to myself or to others what these qualities were. At an intuitive level, I was drawn to the sense of uncertainty and unpredictability captured in these films, where moments of performance were intensely ‘watchable’ in ways that seemed independent of the needs of the plot. They seemed to more successfully reflect the complexity in the interaction between two people when they relate, with the uncertainties, miscommunications, hesitations, contradictions and confusions that can be apparent on many levels, in what is spoken and what is unspoken. Capturing these dimensions of human interaction has become a key objective of mine as a fiction filmmaker.

I recently made the film *How To Change The World* (2008), as a creative practice research project to explore this issue.¹ The focus of the research was on the screen production process from the perspective of a practitioner and emerged from my previous experience as a filmmaker.² The research was undertaken using a reflective practice methodology that involved the regular use of a research journal and various other reflective strategies, including the video recording by others of the production process and a screening with structured audience feedback. Drawing on the outcomes of this research, I will discuss the possibilities and dangers of using improvised performances in screen production. This discussion will involve an exploration of the qualities that make improvised performances distinct, as well as the mode of production best suited to supporting this approach. It will also argue that theoretical perspectives from writers such as Bakhtin (1981; 1986), Fischlin and Heble (2004) and Smith and Dean (1997) can inform the practice and support more meaningful decisions around the use of improvisation in screen production.

What is improvisation and what is its appeal?

I reject the word ‘script’ entirely—at any rate in the usual sense. I prefer the old usage—usually scenario—which it had in the *Commedia dell’Arte*, meaning an outline or scheme: it implies a dynamism, a number of ideas and principles from which one can set out to find the best possible approach to filming. (Jacques Rivette in Monaco 1976: 324)

How To Change The World was made without a script. However, there were two separate two-page outlines written, describing the stories of the main characters, Max (a publican) and Jazz (an international student from India working as a barmaid in Max's pub). These outlines provided a framework for the characters and plot, although neither described an ending. Through the audition and rehearsal process, actors were able to develop their roles so that they felt comfortable about responding in character when shooting commenced. During the filming, a range of strategies was used to generate the dialogue for the scenes. The majority of the dialogue scenes were based on whatever the actors 'came up with' in the first take, without prior rehearsal. That first take was then used as the basis for some additional coverage of the scene. To what extent is it valid to describe this approach as improvisation? The absence of a script suggests a degree of spontaneity but there was substantial preparation and premeditation as well. At the beginning of a detailed examination of improvisational practices in a range of artistic fields since the mid-twentieth century, Smith and Dean (1997) offer a simple definition of artistic improvising as 'the simultaneous conception and performance of a work' (1997: 3). They contrast improvisational with compositional work, defining 'composition' as 'a means of creating art works as fully as possible prior to their exposure to their audience' (1997: 4). These terms, they argue, should not be viewed as mutually exclusive within the one work, so one way of looking at the performances in a screen production such as *How To Change The World* could be to describe them as improvisation within a compositional work. In screen production, for example, the editing stage allows a careful selection and structuring of any unscripted material. In some respects this is an important point that distinguishes improvisation in screen production practice from more purely performative forms of improvisation, which are entirely transient and unrepeatable.

Improvisation in filmmaking and the arts

Considering screen production as a balance between improvisational and compositional practices offers a means for more precisely describing a range of approaches associated with directors known for their use of improvisation. On closer examination, filmmakers popularly associated with improvisation such as Mike Leigh, John Cassavetes and Larry David in the television series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-2011), are all using the concept in different ways and at different times. These different approaches reflect the tensions in much screen drama between encouraging a documentary-like verisimilitude while maintaining control over a complex technological and logistical creative process.

Leigh, for instance, works without a script and creates his films through an extended and heavily improvised process of character development with his chosen actors. However, when it comes to the demands of the filming stage, everything is decided and controlled (although not written down). According to Leigh, it is a process of 'rehearsing it all very thoroughly so that the only things that can go wrong are those things you can't control' (Movshovitz: 112). Cassavetes also heavily qualifies his use of improvisation, claiming that there was virtually no 'verbal improvisation' in his films and confining his use of the term to the emotions conveyed by his characters.

After *Shadows* (1959) I realized that things work better when they're written down beforehand. There are fewer problems. Once the script is written, people can act more freely. Otherwise there's too much tension. It's too hard to deal with. What happens is that the audience gets the impression of improvisation because the actors interpret their roles themselves. (Cassavetes J and Carney R (ed.) 2001: 161)

David uses an approach on *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-2011) known as 'retroscripting', where the production team works from an outline but the dialogue is improvised at the point of filming.³ This is closer to the approach employed on *How To Change The World*. In contrast to the methods of Leigh and Cassavetes, David's approach does not seek as much control at the time the drama is actually recorded, instead actively attempting to capture unexpected material at that stage of the process. According to Smith and Dean, this is consistent with broader understandings of improvisation in the arts. While critiquing the 'naïve romantic notions of spontaneity, simplicity and lack of expertise' (1997: 25) that have grown around improvisation, they highlight how

...most statements about improvisation stress its exploitation of the present moment and the concomitant excitement and fluidity this generates. Improvisers rarely commence with a detailed awareness of what will happen; and in many cases they are actively striving for the event to be novel. (Smith and Dean 1997:25)

Fischlin and Heble (2004) are also critical of some of the myths that they argue are associated with improvisation, such as the position that it is about 'unblocking the obstacles that impede access to forms of individual self-expression' (2004: 23). While improvisation is clearly focused on responding to the unpredictability of the moment, these writers and others, such as Soules (2004), stress how improvisation often operates within formal structures or constraints that connect the practice to collaborators and broader creative, social and cultural contexts.

Improvised approaches seem to challenge significant conventions of screen production that are widely accepted – including concepts of duration, structure and the relationship between performance and narrative. They also challenge many methods that have been developed to support a more planned and controlled approach to the production process, such as the use of a script. The role of the script in stage and screen drama is widely accepted. However, there are some writers who question its central function in the process (Geuens 2000; Sainsbury 2003; Millard 2006). The tension between a more controlled approach to the production process, expressed through the use of a script on the one hand and a more exploratory, uncontrolled approach that emphasises the 'doing' of the performance on the other, has been highlighted by Schechner (1988: 69) as a feature of theatre across cultures and through history.

The twentieth century saw the cinema develop as a major form of mass media entertainment, and from early in this period most films were produced in an industrial context. Describing the understanding of the emerging classical Hollywood production system as it developed around 1910, Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger (1985) write

The basic principles of Hollywood film practice are here already: the story as the basis of the film, the technique as an 'indiscernible thread', the audience as controlled and

comprehending, and complete closure as the end of all. Moreover, these ideas soon came to be accepted as a set of truisms. (Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger 1985: 195)

Within a production system that Bordwell et. al. (1985) argue emerged as a globally dominant mode of production, the script plays a central role in the control of the filmmaking process. Thompson has more recently argued that little has changed in contemporary cinema (1999: 346).

There are, of course, many advantages to using a script beyond controlling the logistics of the filmmaking process. Scripting is usually needed when the focus is on complex plots, layered subtexts, elaborate visual effects or witty dialogue. Furthermore, the existence of a script does not, on its own, require the resulting film to be shot in a rigid, literal or prescriptive way. However, my own experience on a film such as *Holidays On The River Yarra* (1991), suggests that the classic Hollywood mode of production in which most films are produced too easily leads to the script over-determining the screen production process, resulting in what Geuens has described as ‘film as a mere illustration of a pre-existing story’ (2000: 95). Millard (2006) provides a detailed critique of the role of script gurus within the contemporary film industry and the consequences of this for practitioners interested in a more visual and improvisational approach to storytelling. She draws on evidence from filmmakers such as Raul Ruiz, Wim Wenders, Atom Egoyan, Gus Van Sant and Wong Kar Wai in arguing for an approach to screen production that is more diverse, creative and cinematic. Working without a script shifts the focus in the process to the performative but what are the qualities in an unscripted performance that sets it apart?

Spontaneity

Prior to *How To Change The World*, I would have used a term like ‘spontaneity’ to describe the appeal of improvised performances. I now feel it is a component of the issue but insufficient on its own to describe what is going on. Nonetheless, the impact of what Smith and Dean (1997) describe as ‘the present moment’ in many of the scenes shot for *How To Change The World* are a key feature of their appeal. The improvised approach lends a quality to the unfolding interaction between the characters that is hard (although perhaps not impossible) to replicate when the dialogue is determined in advance. The unpredictability that operates within an improvised scene around each character working at communicating meaning while making sense of the other characters’ meaning feeds into the broader sense-making of the audience responding to the unfolding narrative. I would argue that this sense of unpredictability enhances the drama, operating almost like a mild form of suspense.

Conceiving of meaning in a speech act as a two way process involving both a speaker and listener was addressed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) in his theory of the dialogic. Although he wrote almost exclusively on the novel, Bakhtin is widely seen as a philosopher of language more than a literary critic (1986: xiv-xv). For Bakhtin, the meaning of an utterance cannot be determined by considering it in isolation. He viewed the process of human communication in all its forms as ‘dialogic’. Bakhtin’s ideas are useful in conceiving of an approach to screen narrative that better reflects my understanding of the nature of human experience in society, and addresses some of the

reservations I have with mainstream forms of screen-based storytelling. I believe the looser, hybrid and poly-vocal approach to screen narrative that I was experimenting with in *How To Change The World*, with its emphasis on improvisation in dialogue and narrative structure, can be seen to have parallels with Bakhtin's views on language.

The basic unit of analysis in Bakhtin's theories is the utterance. This focus on the speech act as distinct from the written word highlights the centrality of practice to Bakhtin. In his consideration of language, Bakhtin also emphasises the complex and heavily contextualised interaction between speaker and responder in determining the meaning of an utterance.

In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement. To some extent, primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the grounds for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. (Bakhtin 1981: 282)



A scene from *How To Change The World* that highlights some of these issues was between Jazz, the Indian international student working at a pub to help pay her fees, and Sarah, a more experienced barmaid she befriends. Jazz has a date with a regular customer at the pub (Pete) and is asking Sarah for advice. Both actresses had preparation on their characters prior to the shoot commencing. However, compared to some films I have made, such as *Holidays On The River Yarra* (1991) or *Stargazers* (1999), I would not describe the preparation as extensive. Before the actual shoot, there was only a general discussion of the content of the scene. For example, issues subsequently covered in the dialogue such as Pete's character, what Jazz should wear, even the fact that it was her 'first date', were not discussed. The scene was shot without prior rehearsal. In this context, I felt the dialogue the actresses came up with

and how they captured the social and emotional dynamic between the characters were far more compelling than I had anticipated. The sense in which the two characters have independent subjectivities that are sometimes connecting and sometimes not, the quite visible tension at play between the spoken and the unspoken, and the emotional nuances and complexities in the relationship were, to me, portrayed quite effortlessly by the two actresses in a way that has a richness I am convinced I would be unable to script. Jazz wants advice about ‘having fun’, what to wear and how she should look. She is hesitant and nervous about an unfamiliar social situation but also excited by the possibilities. Sarah is trying to warn about concerns she has with Pete’s motives and potential dangers she is sensing. When Jazz does not respond to her tentative expression of concern, Sarah changes direction in a desire not to spoil Jazz’s fun. None of these issues were discussed in advance between the actresses and I. However, what makes the scene different for me is the texture, detail and fluidity of the interaction, the clear sense that there are multiple thoughts going on, some of them only half thought and abandoned, different and contradictory emotions rising and falling, with a complex array of gestures and expressions that accompany the interchange.

My experience with a scene such as this supports the view expressed by Fischlin and Heble (2004: 23) that, contrary to the myth that improvisation is primarily concerned with unrestrained self-expression, it is more often intensely social, dealing with performers listening as much as speaking, negotiating meaning in the moment, foregrounding the process of communication as well as the failures of communication.

Multiple viewpoints

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (Barthes 1977: 146)

A feeling that has always drawn me to improvisation is the conviction that I could not write the type of dialogue that is produced using this approach. To me, one of the strongest motivations for moving towards an increasingly improvised approach was the dissatisfaction in my practice with the limits of my own creative perspective. I realised as I moved away from a reliance on a written script that it shifted the focus from the author/director being the sole source of creative authority on the shoot (or the script as the creative bible for the production) towards a more varied and diverse approach. The film was not limited by my imagination, it did not just reflect my way of doing things and saying things. There is of course a risk of going too far in this direction and lapsing into multi-perspectival incoherence but exploring the nature of this balance was a major focus of this research.

The scene illustrated below struck me as a successful synthesis within *How To Change The World* of multiple creative voices, where the actors made distinctive individual contributions that were both independent of the needs of the plot but also integrated into it.



In this scene, Jazz is chatting to a university friend (Nick) when she realises she may be being watched by Pete, who has not taken well to them breaking up. In one long shot broken by two cutaways of the parked car to which Jazz is referring, the dialogue moves from an anecdote Nick tells about a local event, ‘Bollywood at the Bowl’, to a slightly humorous exchange when Jazz refers to the car she has spotted, then shifts gear into a more serious tone with Jazz telling Nick about Pete (which has unstated implications about how Nick feels about Jazz) and expressing serious fears about her safety.

As well as seeing communication as an active and dialogic process, Bakhtin also saw it as intensely contextual, with the meaning of any utterance being influenced by myriad social, historical, cultural and personal forces. He used the term ‘heteroglossia’ to describe this aspect of language (1981: 293). As for Bakhtin in relation to the novel, I feel the potential richness of an improvised approach to screen drama is in its ability to capture this contextual complexity in language and society, mixing diverse voices with their individual perspectives, and the ‘extreme heterogeneity of speech genres’, (1986: 61) from brief everyday exchanges to sophisticated literary, philosophical or scientific reflections.

Nick’s anecdote about going to Bollywood in the Bowl is just one example of many in the film where the social and cultural richness of the everyday world is incorporated into the narrative. I believe one of the features of the world I wanted to portray was its diversity and heterogeneity. Capturing that in greater than usual complexity was one of the distinct goals I had for the production. Through the range of actors used I was trying to achieve a drama of ‘multiple voices’ that captured the diversity of a community. As Bakhtin describes, I wanted to portray how ‘life enters language through concrete utterances’ (1986: 63).

Improvisation and community

Jazz improvisation and creative improvised music have always...been about community building (rather than individual self-expression), about fostering new ways of thinking about, and participating in, human relationships. (Fischlin and Heble 2004: 23)

In terms of understanding the nature of the improvisational qualities that can be achieved in unscripted performances and that I was seeking to incorporate as much as possible into *How To Change The World*, the final aspect I would like to discuss is the greater sense of community this approach conveys. As Fischlin and Heble (2004) suggest, and as my reading of Bakhtin reinforces, the improvisational approach taken towards the performances in *How To Change The World* shifted the focus during the filming of a shot from the individual actor towards the relationships between the actors. Improvisation, as in the actual interaction between people in society, requires each actor to listen to and respond to what the other actors in the scene offer. The sense of the scene and its success as drama require the actors to collaborate to a much greater extent than in scripted productions. There is an element of unpredictability to the approach that gives it its distinctive dynamism but I would argue it also highlights the role of the individual in the ensemble by, as Fischlin and Heble suggest, ‘intensifying acts of communication, by demanding that the choices that go into building communities be confronted’ (2004: 23). They would argue that ‘jazz [music] has always been about animating civic space with the spirit of dialogue and collaboration’ (2004: 24) and I would agree that part of the politics of improvisation, even in a small way, is how it challenges myths of individual agency that are common in our society and are embedded in both the process and content of much screen production. As I believe the scenes previously discussed demonstrate, they are created through a process of dialogue, with the actors given considerable autonomy over the substance of their characters and how they relate to each other. More so than in traditional scripted approaches, in an improvised production the actors become active.

Power, politics and improvisation

To speak of dialogue without speaking of power, in a Bakhtinian perspective, is to speak meaninglessly, in a void. For Bakhtin, language is thus everywhere imbricated with asymmetries of power. (Stam 1989: 8)

I believe what Bakhtin saw as the diversity and unruliness of speech links to my interest in improvisation. For Bakhtin, meaning in speech escapes control. Portraying a story that shifts the focus towards multiple improvised views rather than one controlled perspective is more consistent with my own experience as an individual in society. Robert Stam, whose book *Subversive Pleasures* (1989) is a detailed exploration of the relevance of Bakhtin’s ideas to the cinema, draws attention to Bakhtin’s focus on issues of power and struggle within the multiplicity of perspectives that he saw as being central to an understanding of language. Bakhtin elaborated on this struggle through the use of the concepts ‘centrifugal’ and ‘centripetal’, with centripetal forces pushing towards an official, sanctioned and ‘proper’ use of language, and centrifugal forces reflecting the diverse and multitudinous uses of speech in everyday practice (1981: 272). For Bakhtin, the centrifugal forces are both

enriching and transgressive, as well as having a political dimension in challenging established power and dominant ideologies, through parody if nothing else.

In this context, a possible way of conceiving of the use of improvised rather than scripted dialogue in a film is to see it as shifting the balance between centrifugal and centripetal forces in screen narrative towards the centrifugal, where the unpredictable interactions between individual actors and the juxtaposition of diverse speech genres is privileged over the more unitary perspective of a writer's or director's approved script. How the diverse fragments of improvised performance produced through this process can be shaped into a meaningful narrative is still a challenge, although arguably no more of a challenge than that faced in many documentary screen production projects.

Conversational filmmaking

Of course, everyone 'improvises.' Conversation is the most common form. (Experimental filmmaker and musician Michael Snow 2004: 49).

In attempting to meaningfully synthesise the various elements of my creative practice in the production of *How To Change The World*, 'conversational' seems an appropriate term to describe the approach. It relates to Bakhtin's concept of the 'dialogic' but is more informal, more quotidian, more aural and therefore, in the context of the film, more suitable. In a similar vein, I could also describe my method as a centrifugal approach to narrative, with multiple dramatic components addressing the audience in a range of voices, rather than a focused, linear one. In this approach, multiple viewpoints, digressions and a looser interpretation of dramatic relevance are used to express the dispersive, contested and contradictory nature of social experience, where situations are unresolved and individual problems are understood as determined by both personal agency and broader social/historical forces.

Conclusion

To direct is to inhale as well as to exhale. (Geuens 2000: 112)

My experience through the production of *How To Change The World* suggests that an approach to screen production that foregrounds improvisation has potentially far-reaching consequences for both the screen production process and the outcomes of that process. My engagement with concepts of improvisation has also led to a questioning of the nature of the relationship between screen stories and the world they seek to represent. Based on my research, I believe the application of Bakhtin's central concept of dialogism has potential to help frame and clarify key aspects of my approach to screen drama, where the emphasis is less on communicating a coherent pre-defined meaning and more on creating a structure where a range of voices and ideas can be expressed. In my view, Bakhtin's discussion of dialogism in relation to speech acts in particular, and to language and meaning in society more generally, has significant parallels with my experience of the way improvisation functions within screen production: that meaning is not fixed but rather created through a process of constant and shifting negotiation between multiple participants; essentially that the creative

process is like a conversation between the people involved in the production, in the same way that meaning in the final screen text can be seen as a dialogue with the audience.

Notes

¹ Background information on this film can be found at <http://www.howtochangetheworld.com.au> . An interview with the filmmaker that discusses many aspects of the work can be found at <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/how-to-change-the-world-an-interview-with-leo-berkeley>

² A history of my film production career, including a complete filmography, can be found at <http://www.innersense.com.au/mif/berkeley.html> .

³ Retroscribing appears to first emerge as a term in relation to the animated television series *Dr Katz, Professional Therapist* (1995-2002), but is now used more broadly in drama, comedy and mockumentary-style live-action production, where the dialogue is improvised from scene outlines. A recent Australian example of this approach is the short television series *Summer Heights High* (2007).

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