

Introduction

Unit Model: An agential improvisatory performer-camera practice

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This research entails the methodological development and formulation of a model for an improvisational film practice using a process of practice-research (Barrett and Bolt, 2007; Nelson, 2013; Smith and Dean, 2009). The research is located in an emerging field which specifically considers analysis and application of improvisational strategies within cinema and narrative filmmaking practices and processes.

Developing and formulating a new improvisational filmmaking practice – which by its nature incorporates multiple interdisciplinary and interdependent roles - provokes methodological questions. It entails establishing new processes and methods and requires understanding how an improvisatory filmmaking process could develop skills and communication across multiple roles and disciplines – performers, camera and sound for example. In devising new shared improvisatory strategies for this film working context, I sought to develop a distributed agency between roles and to re-configure methods of communication and operation.

The process for this enquiry required identifying appropriate research frameworks which can facilitate the investigation into and examination of these methodological and epistemological problems. This entailed devising a Practice-Research framework which enabled understanding and knowledge of processes, and through applied practice, derive new shared interdisciplinary strategies and working methods.

The following research questions were formulated:

- *What strategies might form a model for an improvisational filmmaking practice?*
- *How can a filming process (including roles of camera operator and performer) be reconfigured through ensemble improvisation?*
- *How might agency be understood and afforded within an improvisational filmmaking practice?*

The published material available which specifically considers improvisation and filmmaking practices as a distinct category is very limited. These include: published books (Mouëllic 2014; Murphy 2019); academic papers (Wexman, 1980; Collins 2019; Froger 2017; Villa 2017); a PhD thesis (Berkeley, 2011); a series of contemporary podcasts (West, 2019); and a large scale European Union funded collaborative practice-research theatre project and publication (Vilč, 2015).

At this early stage in the development of the discourses of improvisational filmmaking, these key writers use a range of contested terms: Cinematic Improvisation (Wexman, 1980); Improvising Cinema (Mouëllic, 2014); Improvised ensemble film (Collins, 2019), Improvised Film (West, 2019) and Improvisational filmmaking (Vilč, 2015). The latter term ‘improvisational filmmaking’ (Vilč, 2015, p.83) is used by the only practice-researcher in the field, Sonja Vilč. This became my preferred key term which encompasses the range of practices under discussion throughout this practice-research portfolio.

Contextualising Discourses and Related Practices

Within the new discipline of Critical Improvisation Studies, key comprehensive texts such as *Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies Volumes 1 and 2* (Piekut and Lewis, 2016) and *The Improvisation Studies Reader*, (Caines and Heble, 2015) barely consider improvisation and filmmaking at all, with one contribution (Villa, 2017). Unlike other improvisation disciplines within these anthologies, there is no perspective or insight from any filmmaking practitioner or a detailed examination of an applied working practice.

It is clear that as an emerging field of discourse, improvisation and filmmaking is still examining some fundamental questions regarding what constitutes an improvisation practice within filmmaking. Analysis and discourse is principally derived from a process of re-examining histories and uncovering practices and processes of filmmakers. Researchers commonly discuss the difficulties in discerning specific strategies and understanding improvisation practices solely from completed film artefacts (Froger, 2017; Wexman, 1980). These somewhat limited approaches to research and understanding of processes may account for the surprising absence of filmmaking practices within the broad and radically interdisciplinary field of Critical Improvisation Studies.

The more established fields of theatrical and performance improvisation practices share methods and working structures extensively, with improvisatory theories and concepts often taking the form of summations and distillations of practice (Johnstone 2007; Spolin, 1999). Sharing working processes encourages a consideration of applied practices, adaptation of techniques and their bespoke application. This

enables epistemologies for analysis, comparison, and development and refinement of methods. Dissemination of processes becomes a mechanism for a distribution and activation of new creative forms, *through* and *using* practice.

Understanding improvisation and filmmaking as a distinct practice is further complicated by the possible multi-modal applications of improvisation as an applied creative strategy. Theorist David Collins, in his paper *Aesthetic Possibilities of Cinematic Improvisation* (2019), identifies that improvisation applied within a filmmaking process operates across a broad spectrum of diverse practices – from a limited use in performance, for example, to extensive strategic applications which can shape the outcome of an entire project. From his theoretical position he speculates and considers ‘*other ways in which a film might be improvised in addition to the acting*’ (Collins, 2019, p.270). He describes how shared improvisatory strategies and processes might be extended to other interdisciplinary roles – improvisation by performers and the improvisation of camera operation and other roles working together. Collins’ theoretical proposition is a co-constitutive filmmaking practice which unfolds through a combined improvising performer and improvising filming process – an improvisatory performer-camera practice operating within an ensemble form.

Improvisation practices from other disciplines such as theatre and music, nurture and utilise individual and ensemble skills for anticipation, awareness, observation and communication between participating roles – shared knowledge and ways of being and responding together. These skills are realised through the development and use of shared strategies and a familiarisation of dynamic working structural forms. These

structures enable spontaneity and help elicit dynamic responses from all roles within unfolding improvisation – skills assimilated and activated through ensemble practice.

While this research enquiry references and builds upon the improvisation discourses emerging in filmmakers, and uses film examples to establish key concepts that are prevalent within the field, the focus for this research enquiry is not a comprehensive history of improvisation practices in filmmaking. It becomes evident from the quantity and vast array of examples each writer references that this requires significant research in its own right. That said, their collective work does begin to establish commonalities and identify recognisable processes in/for improvisational filmmaking. These arising commonalities and processes are discussed in Contextual Video Essay 1: *Identifying Improvisatory Performer-Camera Practices within Improvisational Filmmaking*, which forms part of this research and considers these theorists and practitioners together for the first time.

J.J. Murphy in *Re Writing Indie Cinema Improvisation Psychodrama and the Screenplay* (2019) notes that there has been surprisingly limited examination of improvisation practices within the field of film studies (Murphy, 2019, p.282).

There are relevant examinations of individual directors and films which use some degree of improvisation as part of their creative process (Rosenbaum, 1977; Carney, 2001; Renoir, 1989). Existing typologies, theory and modes of analysis from film studies (Coleman, 2009; Branigan, 2006; Buckland and Fairfax, 2017) are not considered at all by writers examining improvisational practices in filmmaking.

Leo Berkeley (2011) in his practice-research thesis makes a comparative examination of film production models and processes (Geuens, 2000; Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1988) in relation to applications of improvisation within low budget filmmaking, but comparative models of production are not our concern here.

With my research focus on improvisatory ensemble practices and relations, *individual* artist film practices and the wider practices of experimental filmmaking (Rees, 1999) are also not included in this research.

The key distinction with writers such as Murphy, Mouëllic and Collins is in their examination and specific interest in improvisatory processes as the primary creative strategy for filmmaking. The films and camera practices of Jean Rouch (2003) provide a useful reference for applied improvisation within filmmaking processes. Rouch applied improvisatory processes of the camera and filmmaking through both theory and practice. Rouch's innovative concepts for improvisatory performer-camera practices, ensemble filmmaking and assembly strategies are examined in conjunction with the writings of Gilles Mouëllic as part of Contextual Video Essay 1: *Identifying Improvisatory Performer-Camera Practices within Improvisational Filmmaking*.

With practices of improvisation being their focus, writers such as Murphy, Mouëllic and Collins look beyond Film Studies and guide us towards other established disciplines within improvisation within theatre and music. Looking to these other disciplinary practices can help articulate the improvisatory processes at work and indicates a useful way for considering research in this field.

With a primary focus on *practices* of improvisation and analysing processes, many theoretical perspectives such as Vilč (2015) favour existing improvisation theory and practices from theatre (Spolin 1999; Johnson 2007;) and other writers refer to music (Mouëllic, 2014). This use of theoretical frameworks for improvisational filmmaking derived from other disciplines is also reflected in my own research. The Contextual Video Essay 2 – *Improvisatory Frameworks: Developing Models for Practice*, examines models for improvisation practice and includes examples from Viola Spolin (1999) and theatre practice, Jazz and music practices, including John Stevens (2007), John Zorn (Bracket, 2010) and theorist Bruno Nettl (2015).

Methodologies

This research enquiry explores processes through practice and derives and defines problems and questions which were results of practice and experimentation.

This required ways of considering and examining results of improvisation practice.

Donald Schön's *Reflection-in-Action* (Schön, 1983) methodology was used principally to examine my emerging research output, and utilised towards the development of a 'repertoire of examples, images, understandings and actions' (Schön, 1983 p.138).

Schön's methodology provides ways for considering and understanding the multi-layered processes at work during practice as it unfolds, and also through subsequent examination. It enables a way of understanding the processes at play which encompass and encourage exploratory and analytical approaches. This methodology is a form of applied practice in itself and provides ways for considering and refining new processes *through* practice.

This methodological approach to improvisation is reflected in my choices and application of theoretical frameworks, and this is reflected in my range and focus of research outputs. The five practice-research workshops and related Workshop-Films used Schön's methodology as a process of testing and refining emerging improvisatory processes and strategies. This forms the core research framework for each of the *Methodology Video Essays 1-5* and *Workshop-Films 1-5*. The *Methodology Video Essays 1-5* analyse each workshop and document practices alongside interviews and discussions with some of the eighteen participants and collaborators across the research period.

Other key methodological frameworks are offered by Edgar Landgraf (2011; 2018) and Karen Barad (2001; 2007). Landgraf considers improvisation from a primarily methodological position, which foregrounds operational structures. His writings and ideas formed my core approach to the development and staging of practice and the documentation and development of ideas. His concept of improvisation as a development of dynamic structures is considered in relation to examples of improvisation practices and my own research outputs in Contextual Video Essay 2 – *Improvisatory Frameworks: Developing Models for Practice* and also Contextual Video Essay 3 – *Unit Model: An Intra-active and Agential Practice*.

This consideration of the dynamic structures in improvisation during my own practice research drew me towards the writings of Karen Barad and their relational ontology 'agential realism' (Barad, 2007 p.132), which 'introduces an altogether different understanding of dynamics' (Barad, 2007 p.179). Rooted in knowledge and study of quantum physics, their reconception of agency as 'intra-activity' and an 'enactment'

(Barad 2007, p.214) informed epistemologies in ensemble improvisation workshops practices and films and the research output *Unit Model Games*.

Barad's theories do not directly reference or consider improvisation within the ontology of agential realism but the concept of intra-activity has been applied and explored within performance practices (Scott, 2015; Jones, 2015; McKinney, 2019). Karen Barad's ideas in this research enquiry are realised *through* practice and shaped the research outputs. Barad's theories influenced an understanding of improvisation as the unfolding of dynamic relations. These concepts permeate my understanding of both performer-camera practices and ensemble relations, and influenced multiple research outputs and contextual material. Barad's ideas are considered in relation to my own practice and the research output *Unit Model Schematic* in Contextual Video Essay 3 – *Unit Model: An Intra-active and Agential Practice*.

Landgraf's recent writings on improvisation and agency, begin to align improvisation and posthumanism (Landgraf, 2018). His analysis does not consider Barad, but he does explicitly consider improvisation as a systemic process that is shaped by the multiple dynamic agencies involved in its unfolding. During this enquiry, these methodological and theoretical positions resulted in what Barad terms a dynamic 'intra-play' (Barad, 2007 p.179) of concepts which informed and shaped the on-going research. While such concepts inform and are at work in my research, it is worth noting that the emphasis of this enquiry is methodological and is focused on the development of new forms of practice rather than being philosophical or explicitly theoretical in nature.

Interdisciplinary practices and collaborators

My work over 30 years comprises an inter-related network of interdisciplinary practices which encompass filmmaking, media art, theatrical practices, performance, choreographic collaborations for stage, installation, cartography, diagrammatic drawing and music. My works are frequently methodological, process driven, collaborative and combine multiple interdisciplinary practices in video and film forms. Improvisation practices form an ongoing part of my work both as a musician and in theatrical performance for the stage. My performance drawings (Gomes, 2004; Frodsham, 2015, pp. 204-220) were locative media works (Galloway, 2006) were diagrammatic performance-drawings for camera and used improvisatory processes. I also consider teaching as integral to my creative practice. This involves the formulation of methodologies and experimental working models including pedagogical frameworks for group learning. The research outputs are articulated through diagrammatic processes, filmmaking, split screen video and improvisation in performance and improvisation of camera operation. This research enquiry and the analysis of research material manifested and combined many of my earlier practices.

My theatrical work with Mark Phoenix and improvisational Third Person Theatre Company (Johnston, 2006, p.347) established me within a large pool of actors. These collaborators are all specialists in 'long form' extended improvisation in performance (Adams, 2007). These performers formed parts of every ensemble and were integral in shaping the direction of the improvised workshops and the specific material produced in the research and *Workshop-Films 1-5*. This ensemble of collaborators, eighteen in total during the research period, each contributed to the development of methods and improvisatory strategies. Their extensive experience of improvisation

practices in both theatre, performance, and music enabled on-going and detailed discussion about the unfolding research. Each workshop became an investigation and collective learning experience for the participants involved. Their participation and contributions are documented in the workshop *Methodology Video Essays 1-5* which feature discussions on the development of the emerging practice, improvisation model and games.

The research framework instigated five practice-research ensemble workshops using a regular pool of improvising players. The sixth improvisation workshop in October 2020 explored and played *Unit Model Games* with students as part of the Master of Fine Arts Scenography programme at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London.

Research Outputs: Using Multi-Modal Forms

The research is developed and shared through multi-modal forms including the development of videographic essays (Keathley and Mittel, 2016); the creation of ensemble film works, workshop practices, drawing and schematics.

The schematics developed into a practical tool to examine the emerging work and results. These diagrams are initially used to develop categorisations and extend analysis. Shared versions of schematics were produced for communicating ideas to actors and crew during the development of projects. The schematics incrementally collated emerging strategies and developed a series of working modes. These were integrated by each ensemble into their improvisation practice. The modes were assimilated and learned by each ensemble which enabled communication between

players, exploration of shared knowledge and ways of being together. Schematics and diagramming processes feature in multiple video essays including Contextual Video Essay 3 – *Unit Model: An Intra-active and Agential Practice*; Methodology Video Essay Workshop 5. They are discussed in detail and in relation to *Unit Model Games* in Contextual Video Essay 2 *Improvisatory Frameworks: Developing Models for Practice*.

The *Unit Model Games* were conceived to be used within an ensemble workshop context. Game formats formed part of all *Workshops 1-5*. These were often instigated by ensemble players and sometimes through ensemble discussion. The *Unit Model Games* are an improvisatory framework and are conceived and designed to build skills and develop relational awareness as an interdisciplinary ensemble. The *Unit Model Games* are playful and exploratory in form and their influences and development is examined in Contextual Video Essay 2 – *Improvisatory Frameworks: Developing Models for Practice*.

Navigating the Research

Research outputs and documentation and analysis of methodological processes are set out in this website format. This became a practical solution which evolved during the collation of research, using videos essays and other materials for download. The form of this practice and its outputs communicate the research processes and conceptual ideas in the research through visual means.

The three Contextual Video Essays, five Methodology Videos Essays and related Workshop-Films are briefly summarised below. *Contextual Video Essays 1-3* are

conceived as stand-alone research films. Concepts and theoretical ideas feature in all three and are cross referenced in different ways.

Contextual Video Essays 1 and 2 in combination communicate many processes and key ideas at work across the research – Contextual Video Essay 2 – *Improvisatory Frameworks: Developing Models for Practice* and Contextual Video Essay 1: *Identifying Improvisatory Performer-Camera Practices within Improvisational Filmmaking*.

Unit Model Games (2020) and *Unit Model schematic* (2019) are in downloadable .pdf format. The dropdown menu at the top of this website enables navigation between different stages and aspects of the research.

CONTEXTUAL VIDEO ESSAY 1

Identifying Improvisatory Performer-Camera Practices within Improvisational Filmmaking

This video essay considers research by four key writers in the field and their work is collated together and considered as a field for the first time. These include: David Collins; Gilles Mouëllic; Sonja Vilč; and J.J Murphy. Using visual film examples, the essay examines a spectrum of improvisation practices within filmmaking and applied strategies for performer-camera relations.

Running Time: 37'33

CONTEXTUAL VIDEO ESSAY 2

Improvisatory Frameworks: Developing Models for Practice

This video essay examines how frameworks for improvisation, such as workshop exercises, visual scores and games produce dynamic structures which develop improvisation skill and practices. Using interdisciplinary examples, including John Stevens (2007), Viola Spolin (1999) and John Zorn (1984), the essay shows the development of *Unit Model Games* and examines improvisatory frameworks through the writings of Edgar Landgraf (2011; 2019) and Bruno Netti (2015).

Running Time: 59' 39

CONTEXTUAL VIDEO ESSAY 3

Unit Model: An Intra-active and Agential Practice

The essay considers the influence of Karen Barad's (2007) relational ontology *Agential Realism* on the development of the *Unit Model* as an improvisation practice. The video essay articulates how Barad's key concepts and terms can articulate improvisation in practice and how the *Unit Model* schematics became an integral research tool in the mapping of unfolding relations in the research workshops.

Running Time: 24' 58

Five Ensemble Research Workshops and Workshop-films

These video essays use the methodological writings of Donald Schön (1983) to articulate and reveal processes from five ensemble improvisation workshops. Each workshop is considered using detailed documentation, interviews with participants and practitioners and is examined using Schön's methodologies. Strategies and processes from these workshops developed into the *Unit Model Games* (Gomes, 2020) for

developing improvisation practice. Each workshop produced a workshop-film which was developed by the improvising ensemble. Each workshop-film has a correlating video essay which examines its methodological processes.

Methodology Video Essay: Workshops 1-4 is a collated examination of four workshops and *Methodology Video Essay Workshop #5* is a longer and detailed examination of the application of strategies in practice. Across these films, *Workshop-Films 1-3* examine and develop new strategies through ensemble practice, and *Workshop 4* and *Workshop 5* begin to integrate and test specific strategies in practice. *Workshop 5* details the application of working modes in practice with extensive scene analysis.

METHODOLOGY VIDEO ESSAY: Workshops 1-4

This video essay examines the methodologies, strategies and processes used within first four improvisational filmmaking workshops. These workshops developed and tested strategies and approaches in the emerging model.

Running Time: 41' 33

Workshop-Film #1 [Mulberry Walk]

Running Time: 8' 50

Workshop-Film #2 [Tunnel]

Running Time: 6' 27

Workshop-Film #3 [Knowing Unknowing]

Running Time: 28' 59

Workshop-Film #4 [Rehearsal]

Running Time: 15' 04

METHODOLOGY VIDEO ESSAY: Workshops 5

Running Time: 55' 07

Workshop-Film #5 [Routine Scenes]

Running Time: 67'48

***Unit Model Schematic* (2019) .pdf download**

The *Unit Model* schematic is a collation of strategies and processes for improvisational filmmaking. It was iteratively developed throughout the research and was a key tool for examination, discussion and ideas with all ensemble members. It was produced in a physical printed form as a large scale fold out 'map'. To organise the material, it uses a 5 colour key, which correlates to the coloured sections in the *Unit Model Games* booklet.

***Unit Model Games* .pdf (2021) .pdf download**

The *Unit Model Games* is a booklet designed for accessible workshop practice. It focuses on developing skills and practices as an ensemble. The booklet outlines approaches and structures for workshops. It details the sharing of roles, and outlines the key concepts for developing a practice. The sections include *Preparation*, *The Ensemble* and a series of games designed to explore and assimilate new ways of working. The indicative games explore different working modes and provide a dynamic

and accessible way for exploring ensemble improvisational filmmaking and developing skills through playful workshop practice.