From Problem Solving to Improvisation in Filmmaking

Production of "*Falling Grief*" & "*Circadian Anguish*"

by

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Abstract

This exposition provides the insight of indeterminacy during improvisation, as well as the reflection process of how I converted my problems-solving skills to planned improvisation during the adverse filming condition of my graduation feature film production.

I define Improvisation as a way to be adaptive and flexible in uncertainty, while problem-solving as a solution to overcome the obstacles faced.

I started from an ambitious goal by making a feature length hybrid film for my graduation showcase in my two years of master study. Facing problems like lack of money, insufficient network to find talents and limited time to acquire local knowledge of the working styles in the country, I met a lot of challenges. When I solved the problems one by one within this filmmaking process, I gradually realized I relied quite a lot on improvisation. It does not only apply on the set when I worked with the actors, but also on scriptwriting, crew recruiting, locations scouting, shots creation, etc.

The turning point for me to change from coincidental (unplanned) improvisation (because it is needed with problem solving) to deliberate (planned) improvisation started from my second half of principal photography (or simply called production/filming) stage because more uncertainty emerged and I started to get used to such style.

At the end, I made two versions of the films with different levels of improvisational practice. I will reflect my whole filmmaking process and its connection with improvisation from my film products.

Contents:

__Introduction__

I am in the final year of artistic research of my master programme called "The Art of Impact", in which I specialize in transmedia (mainly in film and immersive platform) research and experimentation. I am also learning previsualization skills through various digital technology nowadays, and apply such skills for filmmaking preparation process. Previously, my profession is specialized in filmmaking. My works cover from commercial to arthouse products. My primary role is a director but quite sometimes I also handle camera, scriptwriting and postproduction. As an Asian-rooted European filmmaker, I consider myself having a cross-cultural background in Eurasia.

My graduation film project "*Falling Grief*" is a hybrid feature poetry and psychological drama. It is about a depressed woman with a suicide attempt due to her guilt from her lover's death. She has to overcome it by a journey in Stockholm with her lover's autistic brother together. I also bring up the message about "what is real" through the characters 'experiences.

Still 1 of "Falling Grief"

Still 2 of "Falling Grief"

The trailer and more background information of "*Falling Grief*" are available as follow:

https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/837543/842819

Improvisation is a complex topic because it can be highly subjective. When I used problem-solving mindset to deal with the obstacles during my filmmaking process, my thought tended to be logical, systematical and absolute. On the other hand, when I unintentionally adopted improvisation during problem-solving process, it gradually put

on more indeterminacy and complexity.

As I defined in the abstract that improvisation has to adapt flexibility and uncertainty, allowing plan change to response to unpredictable situation is an example. In other words, I let my improvisation workflow being flexible with plan changing to release the energy of creativity The quote from Mouellic *(2013)* (the author of the book "Improvising Cinema" which quoted tremendous cases of improvised filming during French New wave) describes improvising cinema as:

"In improvised filmmaking, each decision reached in the course of the creative process seems designed to release unpredictable forces on set and to turn each shot into an event in itself and not the representation of an event."[1] p.11

Hereby I also add an extra point about how to turn the filming into an event in itself but not representing of an event. From the essay "*Playing the Waves The Name of the Game is Dogme95*", Jan Simons further interpreted what "itself" in his discussion about another commonly improvisation-oriented filmmaking movement: I Dogme95 in Denmark. He mentioned the Dogme directors created a simulation of an event instead of a representation, because the enacted and filmed event is based on the "model of a situation" described by the settled script. The "model" built and put in the simulation in Dogme concept is meant to let the model setup mimic as much as the event itself.[2] Therefore, the difference between "the event in itself" and "representation of an event" is that the former one involves a creation of a simulated model, while the later one does not. The function of Improvisation is to help the "model" to fit in the simulation and reach to the event itself, so that the film becomes more believable and authentic.

I believe the main reason why I replaced problem-solving with improvising mindset is because the problems I faced in this filming project are also full of uncertain scenarios that could be out of my control.

Creativity usually deals with an unforeseeable and complex environment. Montuori *(2003)* illustrates how improvisation creates surprise to serve the purpose in creativity, with an example of football players improvised bouncing of the ball to feed off the

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[1] Introduction, Improvising Cinema p.11
[2] Playing the Waves The Name of the Game is Dogme95 p.189

opponents. He believes improvisation is crucial to the existential reality of complexity.[3]

Making use of improvisation can be a natural process when we face obstacles, just like how a football player faces the opponent in front of him. This "improvised" bouncing is usually preplanned but practiced thoroughly. The decisions made on the field are about to whom and when do the improviser plays the ball.

I try to make this thesis analysis about improvisation different from others by dividing such spontaneous and indeterminate concept into coincidental (or called spontaneous, unplanned) improvisation and deliberate (or called structural, planned) improvisation.

Coincidental (unplanned) improvisation is usually followed by instinct or past experience to create something new. I have experience in Hong Kong film industry before, the filmmakers out there relied on improvising practices very often. For example, the notable Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai shared his experience about making "CHUNG KING EXPRESS". During the production period, he highly adopt improvisation concept by just writing an instant script in the daytime, while shooting in the nighttime. The actors had no idea what the story was about even when they arrived on set.[4] Such style relies on an experienced filmmaker who gets used to working like that and surely also involves a lot of decision by instinct.

But up to what extent and which part of the things are planned, which can be left till last moment to decide? This turns to the topic of deliberate (planned) improvisation.

The essay of Wexman *(1980)* in the "Cinema Journal" introduces a concept about private and public improvisation. Private one can be treated as a rehearsal; however, public one mainly used to serve audiences. Planning is particularly essential for pubic improvisation, Paul Mazursky observed that "being causally getting up on the stage without any preparation will not make up the greatest things in the world" Adopting improvisation in filmmaking also needs higher commitment from the director.[5] This will be illustrated in my process and reflection in the following paragraphs.

It is not easy to measure the success of adopting different ways of improvisation in the entire production, especially in the development and preproduction stages, but during

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[3] The Complexity of Improvisation and the Improvisation of Complexity: Social Science, Art and Creativity" p.241
[4] Interviews with Wong Kar Wai p.125-128
[5] The Rhetoric of Cinematic Improvisation p.30-31

filming stage, as a director, I can define as below:

For a good "deliberate improvisation", even if I leave the freedom to let the crew members and actors improvise on different things, they still fall within the director's framework, that is, I cannot predict but am still under control. According to the French new wave director Eric Rohmer, he knows exactly how each actor will tackle the situation and they are all foreseeable, even there may be more than one possible outcome.[6] That is why in Dogme95 supporters' point of view, *i*mprovisation is commonly encouraged as an inspiration and agreed that "Improvisation without a plan is like tennis without tennis balls".[7]

For a good "coincidental improvisation", however, it is okay that the improvising performance out of the director framework, as long as I do not think that act needs to be re-filmed by another version (it means I ask for extra "take" of the same shot). Because their improvisations convince me that just one-take is enough to show my idea and what I want. Furthermore, I consider it a way to release the creativity and as an example which I quoted from Jan Simons earlier on: "It turns each shot into an event itself but not the representation of the event".

However, no matter which kind of improvisation I adopt, the viewers who watch the end product usually do not care much whether what they see is improvised (except they take the work as a case study for specific purpose, hereby I mainly refer to mainstream group), viewers generally credit a drama show when they feel the performance looks real and actors do not seem like acting. Based on this common opinion, I think a successful improvising works as an end product for mass audience, is to get viewers believe what they see is authentic and real, just like what they will believe in watching documentaries. "Filming fictions as if filming documentaries" was also a main inspiration of French New Wave directors because they mostly worked with amateur-actors, who usually acted based on their real life experience rather than any acting skills.[8]

Upon elaborating the meaning of improvisation and its nature above, I will use the detail of my filmmaking process and then the reflection on the process to facilitate the concept of improvisation I have established.

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[6] The rules of the Game, Improvising Cinema p. 136-137
[7] http://www.dogme95.dk/interviews/the-man-who-would-give-up-control/
[8] Improvisation in New Wave Cinema, Improvisation and Social Aesthetics, p.235

I formulate my research questions as follow and I try to give the answers based on the filmmaking and reflection journey.

1.What are the pros and cons of using improvisation to solve problems in the filmmaking process?

2. How should uncertainty with improvisation be dealt with as one of the means?

3.How did coincidental improvisation and deliberate improvisation change my filmmaking?

4.How do we measure the success/contribution of improvisation method?

5.Based on what criteria did I select the material I made from improvisation?

Filmmaking Process

I divide my whole filmmaking process into four stages. Stage one is the background how I started the film project and early development stage; stage two will continue my later development and the initiation of improvisation; stage three focuses on my preproduction and filming periods when I gradually relied on improvisation for problem solving; and finally stage four is about my delayed days of filming (due to COVID-19) and postproduction by deliberately adopting improvisation.

Bear in mind that except for stage three which involved a group of collaborators improvised together, the remaining three stages were mainly an individual improvisation. That is, I (the role as an auteur) was almost fully responsible for the use of improvisation technique. All other co-workers (if any) in these three stages barely involved in the improvisation practice I discussed in this research.

Stage one (Background and early development):

I started my master studies in early development about how to create a special "form" of the fiction film, the focus on research was about alternative narrative methods in terms of perspective shifting.

In the late development when I wrote the treatment/bulletins-plots, based on the intention

of using special "form", I realized it was appealing to consider using transmedia platforms to improve audience perception as a way of alternative storytelling.

The idea by prioritizing "form" with the help of transmedia was the implanted seeds to create uncertainty, as I had never tried to start a film project from "form" instead of "story", and then let the form induces the writing of the storyline; also applying other media as a presentation was inspired from my curriculum upon experimenting with 360-degree camera filming and VR concept.

My second semester (spring 2019) had a production exam, which gave me the chance for my first experiment about merging cross-media formats. I shot several footages from a "two days super-16mm camera filming workshop", together with a "long take shot" of a two minutes 360-degree video and applied it in VR presentation (watched in a VR headset).

I also tried to adopt proportional improvisation at the 16mm filming workshop. I planned a shot list but did not go for a recce before filming. Also, it had been snowing badly on our filming day, which was quite unanticipated. Furthermore, the camera got a problem on the second day of filming, I lost about 20% of the filming time to fix it. Though we could film again, the rest of the filming was all captured in two times slower motion, it consumed the film roll two times faster. Because we did not have an extra roll of film, it meant I made fewer shots than I planned. We only knew the slow-motion issue after we processed the film roll in the film lab.

16mm filming workshop as a first proportional improvisation.

Yet, I achieved more than 80% footages of my shot list, which was considered already too ambitious at the beginning. I was told I might only be able to finish half of my list. It was the first trial about planned filming (with a shot list prepared) but unplanned improvisation, because of those unexpected problems mentioned above. I solved the problem with my experience in the past by improvising on site. The changing of plan left

myself flexible in adopting spontaneous decision.

Stage two (Late development):

In summer 2019, after I finished the story treatment and decided the "form" of my film, I started to randomly shoot scenery footages as if I was a travel vlogger when I decided the film should have a lot of scenery shots as a poetic film style. I made the decision but yet barely made any satisfactory shooting because I did not have clear targets of what to film. I was in a "cause and effect" loop that on one hand, I expected to get some visual works to inspire my scriptwriting but at the same time, I also understood it should have a script to guide me what targets should I film. This dilemma wandered in my head for a long time. Finally, I got the script done before further filming for visual footages.

However, when I filmed those scenery shots later after I wrote the script, it turned out that I did not have to deliberately look for the shots based on the script. I just filmed them as long as the places looked nice . Maybe the script helped me create those shots in my mind, but at least I know it was not on purpose, because I did not even bring the script with me when I filmed.

It was also possible that I just did not know what scenery shots I should film before I wrote the script. However, the script I wrote became a tool to help me transform the text world into the visual world.

Same as the end of stage one, I completed the second stage in a condition as "a planned filming but unplanned improvisation". This was also another problem-solving situation, which let me pass beyond the writing/shooting block.

Stage three (Preproduction and production):

In the preproduction stage, there were more concrete problems emerged that could not be postponed further. Before I reached this stage, I just left them behind from preventing them from affecting my progress.

In conventional filmmaking, it would not be acceptable if I did not finish writing the whole script before preproduction. The unfinished part was due to the writing block and

uncertainty of the condition of the scene, which I did not know how to implement. However, since those parts could be separated from the main filming, I put them aside first. I gradually let the problem be solved at the time by "last minute or even instant response" with improvising mindset, I believe it could work because of my experience in Hong Kong film industry as an assistant, I followed several directors who used similar practices. Some of them shared some small talks to me about Wong Kar Wai's habit, which were the same in the case of CHUNG KING EXPRESS I mentioned earlier on. In his other film HAPPY TOGETHER, Wong just brought a two-pages synopsis before arriving in Argentina (the filming location of the film). Then he just wrote the script on-set as much as he could. Of course, whether such method would be successful also depended on the actor's style.[9]

I involuntarily let such "starting a new task before the I fully completed the previous tasks" working style carry over from preproduction to production. Later on, I did not wait until the whole preproduction was done and then I kicked off the first filming day.

I divided the 11 days-filming into three stages (day 1 to 5 in October 2019; day 6 to 7 in December, and day 8 to 11 in early 2020). It allowed me to review and plan what to do next from the incomplete script development and the preproduction plan, while I also reckoned it worked easier for the crews' and actors' schedules and I did not have to wait until I got all location permission altogether.

The plan above was meant to solve the problems, or at least temporarily solving them, even some other problems had not been solved yet, just delaying but I did not have to clear them out to start filming. Perhaps such mindset planted the cause of improvisation. First of all, my preproduction started with crew recruitment. As an expatriate, my initial idea of looking for classmates and BA students in SKH's film and media department to work together barely succeeded. None of them were engaged in the project even if they felt it was interesting. Luckily, some acting students took part so at least I got something. For my side casts, I mainly found them through other actors' referral. Basically, I did not conduct any formal casting in this project. I picked them based on the referral comment, their showreel, and my feeling/instinct. It was quite a subjective decision. Although improvisation is also very subjective, I will discuss more about the difference between

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[9] Introduction, Wong Kar Wai: Interviews p.11

coincidental improvisation and intuition at the reflection process.

I decided two of the main casts (two female leading roles: Emilie and Jackie) instantly as they worked with me at the 16mm workshop project. Indeed, this feature-length story is somehow an extension of the 16mm poetic short film. I wrote those two leading characters based on the actress's style and personalities as the blueprint.

I already predicted at that time it would hardly had chance for proper rehearsal time and frequent meetings with the actors, because most of them were under/non-paid of this project. Therefore, writing those characters as a reflection of the actors themselves in real world could work well because even they had to improvise on set, they would just be themselves. Wong Kar Wai insisted on character driven rather than plot driven story in his films. He explained that it took too long during the earliest stage of shooting because he did not give the screenplay to the actors to rehearse, but just communicated with them about the mentalities of characters.[10] As my characters traits are already so close to my two leading roles' actresses in real life, this compensated the lack of meeting time between the director and the actresses.

Unfortunately, one of my main leading actresses quitted in the late preproduction, it was just two weeks before first-day shooting. Although I got her referral of other actresses to replace her, and I finally got her actress friend to take the role, such incident pushed me further to be flexible anytime, it gradually forced me to differentiate between planned and unplanned improvisation to respond to such scenario.

Secondly, I only started to know more about the filming style and practices in Sweden, as it was my first fiction filming project here. I knew in the beginning that there would be many uncertain factors that I would not know until later on (or perhaps I still do not know even until now after I finished the filming)**. S**o I prepared to keep my plan flexible, such a mindset was the main rule in my head during the whole preproduction.

In other words, I prepared my plan for shootings on those locations, but also be ready to change plan anytime due to uncertain problems. It created an environment for improvising work.

I illustrate here two examples about how I had to change my plans when I did the locations scouting. The first one was about the hospital scene. I got a clinic but it did not

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[10] Ibid p.11-12

fit exactly what I wanted, plus its available time also did not facilitate much of my shooting schedule. When there were only four days left before I filmed that scene, I got the reply of another clinic for a permission to film. So I went to check that location alone. Other crew did not have time to see it together. I was the only one who saw the location before and I gave a very short notice to change the filming location. The production designer and the cinematographer (DP) mainly relied to my instruction and their understanding of the story to improvise the set design and camera work upon arriving at the clinic.

The other location was the cruise scenes. I got a cruise company permitted for shooting first, but after they saw my shot list, they changed their mind and turned me down. I made the storyboard with my DP based on the "virtual tour" photos on the cruise website (those scenes on the cruise was also the only scenes I had storyboarded because we were worried that we would not get enough time to improvise on the limited time of the journey on the cruise), the storyboard no longer worked when the cruise was different. We got a shooting permission from another cruise company at last minute, it saved us to keep our filming plan within the schedule in October. Although we also used "virtual tour" photos for references, we did not modify the storyboard based on new references, we just brought that storyboard to try to follow as much as we could on site.

Cruise scenes shooting. The Planning barely based on the "online virtual tour" as a recce (pre-filming visit).

When we were on the cruise, it was as we had predicted that the real location had a lot of things that were not expected, which left us no choice but instantly modifying our shots

list. For example, there were several spots such as some bars and lounge area that were closed earlier than its business hours when there was too few costumers left behind; the opposite case was the spots were filled with costumers, which was surely not an suitable shooting environment. As a result, many shots we prepared from the storyboard were no longer compatible to our real shooting.

We improvised those incompatible shots to solve the problem, it was similar to the process of Wong Kar Wai in this thesis earlier on: Writing the script while shooting on set. I even got to change the script later on at postproduction to facilitate the footages we filmed.

The shooting on the cruise was only in the middle of my stage-one filming schedule. We solved many unpredictable problems on-site by improvisation with flexible plan changing and then I became less and less motivated to draft a storyboard. I even simply skipped the shot list at the last two filming days, because the COVID-19 (Corona Virus spreading) made those two days shooting conditions so unclear and unpredictable. Fortunately, those full improvising filming outcomes were still satisfactory.

Stage four (Postproduction):

In this section, I focus on discussing image editing process in postproduction stage, as I have other collaborators who are responsible for the rest of the works such as sound design, colour correction, visual effect, etc. There is not much room exploring improvisation from those processes.

As I could not find an editor, I also took this role myself. I faced the big challenge that commonly a director-editor would encounter, that was, I missed a chance to edit the film from another perspective, which would usually be relatively objective.

However, by examining the outcome of improvising filming footages, I as an auteur of this project had the advantage of being an editor to select and arrange the footages into the film. Initially, I tried to examine the outcome of various combinations of editing in different takes, by comparing the different level of improvisation I adopted on different filming days (I could estimate which days I improvised to various extent. In general, the later days I filmed, the more I improvised.) But when I started editing a few scenes, I

already found it did not work well.

There is couples of reasons: First, viewers will have a hard time detecting whether it is improvised or scripted by watching the film because the performance normally will have no unique signal showing the characters is improvising in a particular moment; Next, the improvised performance will be effaced readily after the deliberate arrangement of images and sound in the act of editing; Finally, a scene may still be occasionally improvised even if everything is meticulously planned in advance.[11]

As a result, I changed the improvising outcome assessment way: I let myself free from the original script, in order to recreate a new version of a poetic film with a new storyline. I just made use of the same footages I had for this new creation. I set the constraint to myself by not filming anything extra, it was like a simulation in real life where we have to solve a problem with limited resources. Recreating a new story with a complete decomposing and re-composing process became a huge improvising postproduction work. It took a long time to get rid of the project idea I had developed over a year and a half, and then refreshed my eyes as if I were another person with an objective point of view to edit the project. It was a way to hear my own inner voice as an artist in a new channel through the art of impact.

Editing our own directed film is hard because the subjective feeling towards our directed footages usually affects the editing choice. However, it is even harder by re-selecting what footages to put on this new edited "improvising film", because I went through this "subjective" impact twice. In the beginning, My criterion to choose the footages was mainly based on whether the shot was visually attractive enough or not. After I picked several of them, I re-arranged the voice-over recorded earlier on from different characters and then put the relevant shots on the timeline. Yet I gradually found that although such method could let me finish a new work, it was not stimulating enough to release the potential of improvisation power. Finally, I coincidentally followed a similar practice to Wong Kar Wai's film HAPPY TOGETHER:

"Made in an atmosphere of chaotic improvisation at both the shooting and editing stage, these films have created their own category for one of the most fetishized areas of cinephilia: off-screen

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[11] Improvisation in New Wave Cinema, Improvisation and Social Aesthetics p.234-235

space. In Wong's films, however, what is frequently masked is not simply reality or another space but another film. In this cinema in which nothing ever seems quite finished, a certain intoxicated cinephile discourse has come into being, often drawing attention to these magical fragments which are not there."[12]

It worked even easier for my film in a poetic style as audience accepts its nature as incomplete and mysterious. I plan to examine the improvised editing with a survey in future (ideally during a public screening), by inviting 20 viewers or above from different backgrounds, who had not read or watched my original script and film before, to comment what they would feel after watching the new version of film. Initially, I wanted to use this improvised edited film to compare with the original film and saw which one audience would like more. But later on I found this improvised edited version should have a relatively different aim from the original edited film. It was not meant to assess the authenticity of the characters and its story, but it was meant to see the possibility of achieving the same goal in an alternative way with improvisation as a problem-solving method. As a testimonial of the director, it would be more fruitful to see this improvising editing process as a journey, which shows the improvised edited film as a result and a solution, in which I solved the problems raised during the creation of the improvised filmed footages by the re-editing process.

My goal of the film (for both edited versions) here is to deliver the message and feeling about life and death, as well as reality and dream. If the improvised edited version could influence viewers even stronger with such message, the improvisation adopted in postproduction is very likely to be proved successful. At least it applies to me as an auteur. On the other hand, as the audience probably do not notice the improvising elements got involved in between, what important to them is their mental connection to the film.

Filming Process Reflection

Suitability for actors with improvising method:

[12] http://sensesofcinema.com/2000/cteq/happy/

In the beginning, my master film project was not meant for improvisation, I did not prepare enough for deliberate improvisation filming. For example, I did not cast actors whom I targeted for improvising performance, if I ask them to contribute their own dialogue (which is commonly practiced in improvisation) on set while they did not experience much in improvisation, it might become an unexpected requirement for them. I mentioned earlier that improvising filmmaking needs higher commitment from the director. Besides casting, the director also needs to maximize the impact of an improvised scene by subjecting it to imaginative editing.[13] Therefore, it is important that the director has certain experience in improvisation practice, which I acquired from my working period in Hong Kong.

I could have made improvising acting workable if I knew the actors' personal life enough so that I could guide them based on their histories. In the case of this project, I wrote the tailored made character for the actress, but we still did not get adequate time to know each other enough even though we had several meetings during scripting stage. Thus, I felt the result was still not strong and convincing enough on the screen.

There could be another possibility for good improvisation performance, if a cast received enough improvisational training and got used of it. According to my experience, theatre actors usually could improvise, but they may be over-acting once they performed in film, as live theatre performance needs more exaggerated acting, while subtle expression is obvious enough in front of the camera.

I got an actor who liked such style because of his theatre background. He asked for improvisation voluntarily. At one of the shooting day, we agreed to try to push the limit, with alcohol to boost up the impact, it became a little out of control but such over-performance under our chaotic environment was a good try if we had more time for more takes and took that "over" take as a reference to fine-tune the following takes. Unfortunately, we did not plan for it and we were out of time on set, so it only became a lesson to learn that even if the actor could improvise, I still had to see if he could adapt the coincidental improvisation method I assigned particularly.

This research about improvisation also let me think if bad acting might be able to fixed

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[13] The Rhetoric of Cinematic Improvisation p.30-31

by improvising acting. I worked with some actors who remembered the scripted dialogue perfectly but could not turn out a natural performance, because they put every line from the script in their head so their acting seems quite scripted. If there is no script to follow, they have no choice but only to improvise, the result may even look better.

Next, I also did not prepare a tailor-made dynamic camera movement with my DP to facilitate the performance. In the limited filming time, such preparation could have highly contributed to the result. Even though there were certain scenes where I filmed certain shots by myself as a DP, the stress under time constraint could not let me improvise easily without any preparation.

The French New wave director Jean Rouch in his film MOI UN NOIR (1958) involved filming documentary images (similar to the case of improvising act filming fiction) "which required improvisation on the part of the cameraman, who had to adapt to an event as it was unfolding and then "fictionalizing" them through editing and commentary."[14]

Improvising filming also brought a challenge in the editing stage. It was not easy to decide in the sequence that involved improvising acting. For a sequence with the whole take without a cut, it was good for actors' performance being coherent, as well as getting rid of the editor continuity problem. Yet it lost the magic of editing to fix any detail*ed* problem in each take; For a sequence with several cuts between different takes, I could create a "perfect rhythm/scene", such sequence could trick the audience getting closer to a flawless performance on the screen. However, it broke the improvising momentum created in the film.

I only got the chance to compare them clearly when I started editing. I found that there were usually some technical problems I needed to handle at different takes. It turned out choosing one of the full takes and apply directly as the whole sequence was not that easy as I thought.

However, when I combined a whole sequence from different moments of different takes, just like playing a puzzle game, the challenge was not only breaking the improvising momentum but even more importantly the continuity problem. It was because the actors usually acted slightly different at each take. When I edited a couples of takes (Once

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[14] Improvisation in New Wave Cinema, Improvisation and Social Aesthetics p.235

again, I could not film too many takes because of the time and budget restriction), I found that there was actually very few options I could choose to assemble the sequences after clearing out those technical problems. This further complicated the difficulty when each take was not consistent.

The case above referred to my original film project, in which I did not mean to improvise anything during editing. So it was only the actors (who) improvised. I learned from this case that when I did not have clear insight what improvising result I wanted, group improvisation might potentially creating more possible outcomes and hence more choices. But individual improvisation could get less distraction if I had a clear perception on what the improvisation outcome I looked for.

Digital era filmmaking with improvisation to challenge artisan film profession:

When filmmaking has become easier by the growth of digital technologies, in which I feel visual effects with green screen shooting has the strongest effect. On one hand I am happy that filmmaking is no longer just a luxurious wish that is only possible to dream about when I get a huge amount of money to start; but at the same time I also feel filmmaking is less interesting after so many films just relied on computer generated images (CGI) keying with green screen shootings of actors, rather than showing an actual location to film. As a result, I feel the importance of director role is somehow being shifted away and shared to the visual supervisor. I tried to look for a way to defend that "filmmaking can still be interesting".

While I started developing my feature film project, I thought whether my project filmed with improvisation method and adopting cross media elements can be an alternative. Then I put more time to investigate how to apply a "micro-installation" concept. Beforehand I only thought to separate the film into two experiences: 2D normal screening and VR headset viewing.

But then I thought deeper and hope to make such topic a more serious research in future. The topic was about the trend of experiencing audiovisual art with the aid of portable/easy setting, such as using immersive media device to watch the film in cinema/theatre/museum. I believed it highly depends on the installation setup. In my

feature length master film project, I applied mixed reality experience for audience by inviting them to use VR goggles to watch one part of my film. My idea about how to makes use of modern technology to enhance audience perception in traditional cinema theatre viewing habit was one of the huge turning point to let me embrace "uncertainty". Instead of seeing it as a factor raising anxiety, I saw it as a challenge. Then I started to solve problems under uncertainty by improvisation. It was a gradual process from barely relying on instinct (without plan) to deliberate (with plan) improvisation.

Despite the problems of shortage of budget, personal network and resources, just like how the contemporary film industry is doing, I relied a lot on modern technologies to help me to solve the production problems. I experienced and tried out various digital audiovisual skills and equipment which have been becoming more popular in the past two decades. My first-year study in the master programme mainly let me to enhance those skills and apply them to my feature film project.

It was my first time to have tremendous green screen shootings and involved in VR production, some examples of the technological applications include:

First: 360-degree camera shooting. It is a shooting with a camera which can capture all of the angles with various lenses simultaneously, and the captured images can be zoom in and out during editing process). It highly improves editing choices, as a single shooting is enough to let the editor choose any angle and distance he wants and put in the timeline, instead of shooting different shots with a different angle and frame size).

Second: Digital location method. That is, previsualizes the scene without recce. Besides filming on the cruise I mentioned earlier on, where we only saw the real location when we were on board, I also relied on the 3D google map to roughly estimated the general wide shot view of some rural area, it saved me a lot of time to check those far away locations from me.

Those technological applications are not much to do to improvisation itself, but for us living in such rapid growth digital era, the technology surely encourages struggling artists. In my case here, the technologies support and let me take more risk (i.e. improvising) more because they act as a safety net to solve some production problems, by fixing the pre-(digital location) or post-(360 shooting for editing) issues of filming here.
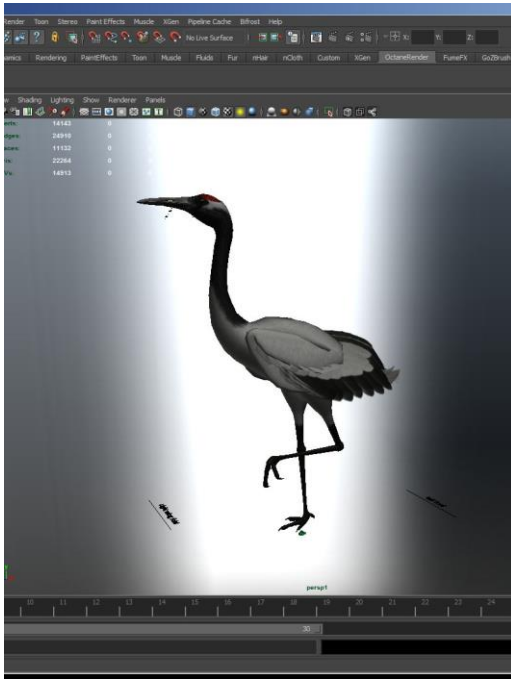
Green screen keying and computer generating images of the crested ibis.

The new mode of filmmaking in digital era combined with improvising filmmaking method serves as a positive value of spontaneity, and hence the possibility to make a feature film with very little resource becomes more and more feasible, as old code of conventional filmmaking is not the only way. Although typical filmmaking practice is still workable, it will be getting heavier, especially after the global Coronavirus crisis (COVID-19), the world is probably going to face an economical depression, the film industry will not be exempted.

 "In order for spontaneity to have a positive value, however, it is necessary that it appears in a context in which the older codes of interaction have become heavy and unworkable. As long as these codes are still in force, spontaneity is perceived as a false mode of interaction, a threat."[15]

As a result, I believe the spontaneous nature of improvisation in filmmaking may have a chance to get out of the perceived false mode of interaction under this economical crisis.

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[15] Improvisation in New Wave Cinema, Improvisation and Social Aesthetics p.245

To summarize my experience in combining improvisation and technological applications here, I bring out "simulating instead of representing the event" concept I mentioned before: Improvising filming in my case is like a process between rehearsal and a formal planned filming, i.e. a post-rehearsal and pre-filming stage in conventional filmmaking point of view.

My project also shows the limit of a micro-budget, timing and resource filmmaking, fortunately, it was improved by the help of technology.

In future, I think I can modify the improvising preparation better with technology, such as making VR rehearsal to simulate the event earlier, i.e. push the improvising work on earlier stage so that we do not have to wait until the proper filming day but only start to improvise at the time.

Reflection on deliberate improvisation, coincidental improvisation and intuition:

Deliberate improvisation involves structural planning in advance, except that I leave more flexibility and freedom for any instant change whenever the situation does not come as expected. On the contrary, coincidental improvisation is a spontaneous practical action with intuition as an internal mental process.

I will say the extent of spontaneity and subjectivity brings the difference between them. I start the reflection on deliberate improvisation, and then further discuss the remaining two thinking practices.

When I look back at the whole project production planning, I tried my best to plan what I could, but I subconsciously also hoped several potential problems could be solved at the time with when we filmed on set with improvisation. Such mindsets and actions resulted in deliberate improvisation practice.

The first issue was about resources. Was it a correct choice to kick off the project before everything was ready, especially under tight budget and manpower? On one hand, I always felt the preparation could be better with a more detail plan, but it seems an endless process to make the plan "perfect"; on the other hand, I also felt fewer problems would occur if we planned better.

Such contradictive loop up to this point is still a question to me. Simply speaking, it is just a decision between doing the project in a timeline planned or postponing it indefinitely. When the deadline came, I chose to do it. I conclude that deliberate improvisation is a suggested method under a scenario that has considerable uncertainties and because the planning can never end due to uncertainties, it is good to use the deadline as the decision-making point and prepare for things to change in between. Even it may be out of all kinds of predictions I could foresee, I just let the plan change whenever it is necessary.

For example, in my case, it was my first time stretching the filming schedule so long in my filming career. It crossed over 6 months, and I found out my inner thought would change when time passed by. First, the break time in Christmas changed my momentum, and then also my motivation and mood on the project. However, If I pushed the production to much, it might also make myself crush when I handled multi-roles in the project. That would be far more than a director should bear.

Second, I usually watched a lot of films for references in the pre-filming period because I would find any shot I could imitate. However, this time at the second stage after the Christmas break, I just stayed away from watching any film. I thought it was due to the mood changed I mentioned, and I would rather believe more I could come up with something exciting by improvisation on set so that I would not rely on imitating what I saw in a pre-filming period.

Third, because of the COVID-19, I postponed my remained 2 days filming at stage 3 for almost two months, this lesson told me that longer schedule could risk at facing more unexpected incidents like this anytime and anywhere.

In terms of coincidental improvisation and intuition, they interact with each other physically (action) and mentally (thinking). As a mental process, intuition is a very subjective matter and hence it is harder to explain. Whenever we use intuition to get an "idea", we usually use it unconsciously. Sometimes it is hard for me to determine how much I have relied on my background knowledge or experience to create that idea. If I look back on the process that lies behind the intuitive "message or thought", I may see it

makes sense. Perhaps if I would have actively go through all the stages in my head before getting the "idea" and then let the idea out as a form of improvisation, I would have more clues about the subjective thought that comes from my experience or literally just come from an unexplainable sixth sense. But I still believe occasionally we make a thought from nowhere without past experience attached. It is just that we will not know when it comes.

As coincidental improvisation is external action/decision, I can be more assertive to explain it. The decision made in my instant improvisation surely rely on my life experience and reference I saw before to help me been assertive. They are not planned in advance as they are coincidental, but the moment I decide something will have a quick flashback in my mind to recall any possible linkage that can relate to my knowledge and memory. As I said above, there is just a very thin line to determine whether the thought comes from instinct/intuition or from experience. Sometimes I cannot tell for sure as well, but what I sum up here is that the more life experience and knowledge we have, the easier we can implement coincidental improvisation.

Conclusion

No matter it is coincidental improvisation or deliberate improvisation, such practice is particularly beneficial if we are in the production with a very restricted resource. As limited resource probably also indicates more possible uncertainties, while uncertainties can be minimized with sufficient research and preparation, which is harder to do with low budget and manpower.

Improvising filmmaking leaves the production more dynamic and subject to change under certain uncertainties, while it creates surprise which is definitely possible to replace the original plan and idea, especially when the plan at the first place does not come up that perfect. The drawback of using improvisation is the uncertainties that may still be unsolved at the end. It is a pain to see the final result with a flaw, which might have been avoided if everything followed the plan without unexpected change.

Dealing with uncertainties is an issue about optimising the plan we have done. I start with prepare whatever I can before the deadline comes, then I leave the rest for intuition and coincidental improvisation. Perhaps trying to get an idea barely on intuition may give a stronger impact, but it can backfire as I will not know if the impact is positive or negative, furthermore, we may have to wait indefinitely to let such idea emerges in my mind. That is why I suggest if possible, making plan as much as we can. Conicidential improvisation is a magic but it is quite hard to be fully control in our hands. I shared in the reflection section about the difference between (the) two types of improvisation, and I will say both of them improved my filmmaking process in different scenarios. It is quite dependent on the status to determine which one should come first. In general, except the crew and actors are experienced enough in coincidental improvisation method, it is more secure to make things more structural, the crew intentionally try to practise improvising filmmaking at the first place.

Finally, about the question of whether we can measure the success or contribution of improvisation method, I still cannot find the answer. First, it is a result-oriented world. If the film is successful, it is much more convincing to tell that filmmaking method is successful too. Next, I feel that the choices between adopting improvisation method and traditional filming method is a "what if" scenario. I would not know if I used the way I abandoned (in my case, the traditional method) might have a better or worse result because both of them would bear different aspects of opportunity cost. Finally, as this master graduation film project did not mean to practise improvisation method at the beginning, I only gradually adopted it for problem-solving purpose. I believe it may be easier to measure the contribution when the entire project is planned to study improvising filmmaking.

Since I only made this project with an auteur role to examine improvising filmmaking, it is probably not enough to draw a conclusion of the contribution from improvisation. I hope there will be more productions in future time with this method I introduced, so that there are more references and examples to help ~~to~~ draw a more defined conclusion in future.

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