A Good Take: The process as a site for screen production research

Leo Berkeley

RMIT University

leo.berkeley@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

Screen production as an academic research discipline has struggled to establish itself, both within the broader higher education sector and in relation to the film and television industry. The lack of conceptual and analytical frameworks with which to understand screen production and which resonate with the experience of professional practitioners contributes to this.

This paper will argue that a focus on the production process may be the best chance for screen production research to define itself as a distinct field of study. Drawing on my experiences making a micro- budget feature film called How To Change The World, the paper will offer some examples of elements in the production process that reward close scrutiny and may have some wider application.

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Introduction

While film and television production is a well-established and popular teaching discipline within higher education, screen production as an academic research discipline is struggling to establish itself. Higher degree candidates making films as their research no longer have any novelty value but, when framing their productions in a theoretical context, these film-making research students have few options but to draw on concepts developed within the more established disciplines that relate to film-making from other perspectives, such as media, cinema and cultural studies, as well as the creative arts and design disciplines.

There is, of course, much of value in these fields. For example, theorists of practice such as Bourdieu (1980; 1993), de Certeau (1984), Bakhtin (1981) and Schon (1983) have a perspective that resonates with the circumstances of the filmmaker, faced with the pressures, uncertainties and myriad contingencies of making a creative work that does not yet exist. Yet the use of these theories to understand the screen production process is clearly the application of ideas imported from other fields and the 'fit' is often uncomfortable. Auterist film criticism can provide insights into the working methods and creative thinking of noted directors. However, this approach highlights the epistemological issues raised by Downton (2003) in his work on design research, where he stresses the difference between research about practice and research through practice. Bourdieu (1980) also argues that scholarly research into practical activities too often treats practice as a controlled object of reflection that does not take adequate account of the urgency and uncertainties of action.

The few academic journals that devote space to the field of screen production still mainly have articles that address what this field might look like once it emerges from a protracted infancy. In contrast, the vast popular and professional literature

on the production process has an overwhelming focus on 'how to' processes that can lack rigour and a critical perspective on accepted professional practices. Furthermore, there is little evidence that the screen production industry sees potential for academic research in this field to have any impact on existing and future practice. If the profession believes the activities of screen production researchers are irrelevant, it is hard to see the field becoming anything other than an academic backwater.

What I want to argue in this paper is that a focus on the production process may be the best chance for screen production research to define itself as a distinct field of study. While drawing on cross-disciplinary fields where appropriate, a rigorous analysis of the complex creative, technical, organisational and commercial factors that shape a finished film offers scope for developing a body of knowledge that is specific to the discipline and relevant to the industry.

So what is there in the practice of production that rewards investigation and how can this research be conducted in a way that the outcomes are defensible as valid knowledge? While there is little published discussion of this issue in relation to screen production, Desmond Bell (2006) has made a recent contribution, in framing the challenge for the screen production research community and proposing the ideas of philosopher David Davies as a possible way forward.

Davies (2004) argues for conceiving of an artwork as a performance, that includes both the production process and the end product. Moving beyond the 'contextualism' that stresses the importance of the art/historical context in appreciating a finished work, Davies mounts a detailed philosophical argument that the artwork is the performance of its production as well as the exhibited outcome. While this view is quite radical and runs counter to widely-held 'common sense' perceptions of how we understand artworks, including films, it does serve to focus attention on the significance of the production process and the relationship between this process and a meaningful understanding of the finished work.

I think it is important to stress that if you accept this approach to screen production as research, it shifts the focus away from a consideration of the finished film to the production process. This has a range of implications for how screen production research is conducted, assessed and published.

How To Change The World

Drawing on my experiences making a micro-budget feature film called How To Change The World, I would like to offer some examples of elements in the production process that reward close investigation and may have some wider application. How To Change The World is a 76 minute film that was developed and produced as a higher degree research project. The objective of the research was to model and evaluate an alternative creative practice in screen production.

Some of the ways in which I would argue the production was doing this include the fact that it was made without a script (and hence used improvised dialogue), integrated fiction and non-fiction elements and was portraying characters, situations and narratives in ways that are not encountered in mainstream film & television.

A key aspect of the research has been focused on the production process and the ways in which the process influences the final film. The methodology I have employed is reflective practice. Having completed the film and reviewed all the data, which includes a research journal, production documents, video of auditions, rehearsals and the production process as well as all the raw footage of the production and multiple versions of the editing process, I have identified a number of issues about the process that I want to explore further. These include the function of the script, conventions around spatial and temporal continuity, performance, coverage, cast/crew relations, the design of narrative structure as well as the overall positioning of the film within the creative and commercial field of screen production. I have themed these around two concepts: the concept of 'control' in screen production and the concept of 'conversational' filmmaking.

A good take

It seems to me that a location in the process where many of these issues are clearly evident is when filming takes of any individual shot. Although a specific and small component of a larger process, one or more takes of a shot can reflect much broader issues relating to the content, style and production process of the film. They allow more general discussions about the process to be grounded in the actual practice and visible to others.

They relate, I think, to Donald Schon's (1983) concept of tacit knowledge, which he argues is common in professional work and which a research methodology around reflective practice can make explicit, to the potential benefit of other practitioners.

The recording of a shot in screen drama can be viewed as an iterative process, with each iteration being a local experiment that moves towards the judgment 'that's a good take', a judgment that is made in the moment and reflects the qualities of what Pierre Bourdieu (1980, p. 81) describes as practical knowledge, with its fuzzy logic that can only be 'grasped in action' and is 'entirely immersed in the current of time'. It is a judgment that is made time after time, day after day. On a feature film or TV series, it is a judgment that may easily be made thousands of times. It seems to me that the nature of these judgments and what informs them is an important issue, with significant consequences for the final outcome. I also believe that, from a research perspective, being able to articulate any pattern or form to the judgments being made could provide worthwhile insights in relation to the nature of the production process and how it impacts on the resulting film.

In reflecting on the often implicit principles I was using to inform my decisions about whether or not to do another take, I produced the following list:

- Can the overall scene work with this take? Will it communicate required plot, character and theme information?
- Is it stylistically coherent? Continuity issues – will it edit with proposed surrounding shots?
- Is the technical execution satisfactory? In relation to camera, sound, lighting and art department
- Are the performances of an acceptable quality?
- Have cast, crew and director's expectations been met?
- If there is uncertainty about the quality of the recorded takes, should another be done for safety ('coverage insurance policy')?
- Are there consequences in doing another take for: Scheduling & budgeting issues? Cast & crew fatigue?

In analysing the judgments I made about 'good' and 'not good' takes on a more general or theoretical level, both on this production and in relation to my previous experience, I realised it was a process with multiple and competing dimensions. It could be regarded as:

- A mechanical process (focused on the elimination of error)
- An aspirational process (aimed at achieving excellence)
- The execution of a plan (usually specified in a screenplay or storyboard)
- A performance (by both cast and crew)
- A speculative or exploratory process (seeking something new or surprising)
- A piece in a jigsaw puzzle (successfully linking a part to the whole)

The Shot Tower Scene

To illustrate these aspects of the process, a take used in this scene of the film highlights some of the points I have been making.

Duration: 2'30"

This was not an exceptional scene in any particular way. In fact, in relation to the creative objectives I had for the production, it reflected a failure of imagination, as I had set myself the goal of coming up with inventive ways to shoot improvised dialogue and this was done in a way I was trying to avoid, which is a handheld two shot. I was trying as much as possible to shoot scenes in long uninterrupted takes. The actors knew what their character's objectives were in each scene and often were asked to get across one or two key points. Second takes and closer angles were commonly done but the actors were told to just play the scene again without trying to duplicate individual lines or actions. Dialogue was not written down.

This scene was not rehearsed prior to the shooting stage and there was not a full run-through before the first take. There were concerns about running out of time (it was the last scene of a long day) and the level of background noise. On the first take, a number of issues were immediately apparent. The actors positioned themselves further apart than either the camera operator or I anticipated. Particularly at the start of the take, the female character moves partially out of frame on several occasions. The microphone also appeared quite noticeably in the top of the frame on a couple of occasions. Offsetting this, I was impressed by the performances. The take captured the characters and their relationship at this stage in the story, the dialogue the actors came up with was expressive and the performances had the fresh and unpredictable quality of doing

something for the first time, a quality I was particularly interested in capturing on this production. Furthermore, the 'mistake' in the actors positioning themselves so far apart immediately struck me as an excellent visual representation for what is going on dramaticaly in the scene: even though they are attracted to each other, there are fundamental differences between the two characters that they are not going to be able to resolve.

The process of shooting this take and the decision whether to do another one highlights a number of issues:

Authorial Intention

From the perspective of a film maker, issues of authorial intention are central to an understanding of the process. While screen production is a fundamentally collaborative process, in most cases cast and crew look to the director for a coherent creative approach to the recording of each shot. I suggest that analysing the execution of the director's plans for each shot is a key issue in understanding the success or otherwise of a film. In theory, this analysis should include an examination of the director's plan, the communication of that plan, the way the communication is interpreted by individual cast and crew members, the collaborative execution of the plan by the production team and the evaluation of the results.

With this film, there were overarching strategies to the production that were being applied as much as possible. These included the use of improvised dialogue and an approach to shooting and covering the action to support effective performances in this context, such as minimal lighting, the use of extended takes and a reluctance to shoot many alternative angles.

In this case, a lack of communication that resulted in what might otherwise be regarded as a 'mistake' had produced a good creative outcome within the context of the production. This throws an interesting light on the concept of authorial control in relation to screen production and is an illustration of the gap that, in my experience, often occurs between directorial intention and the executed outcome, where a complex range of large and small intervening factors either enhance, impede or otherwise influence the work.

Cast and crew dynamics

In my experience, there is a fundamental tension in the screen production process between the needs of the crew and the cast that has not been sufficiently discussed or analysed. When I say this, I am not referring to issues that can be resolved through effective or improved collaboration. Even with the best working relationships possible between individuals in the production team, the environments required for each group to produce their best work rarely if ever coincide. From the point of view of a director seeking to fully realise the creative potential of the performers and the production crew, it is almost impossible to get a satisfactory outcome. In my experience, directors follow a path where both areas are compromised to a limited extent, or else go strongly in one direction at the expense of the other.

I would argue that the optimum environment for actors is for the technical demands on them to be kept to a minimum. Unusual camera angles, complex lighting and ambitious camera movements require time to set up and impose constraints on actors in terms of their positioning and the timing of their performances. They have to hit marks and hit them at the right time. Challenging camera, sound and lighting setups often result in errors in execution by the crew that then require the performance to be repeated or fragmented. Up to a point, talented actors can deal with these constraints without a noticeable impact but it is nevertheless limiting and distracting. In my experience, very few directors have successfully resolved this tension and achieved both sophisticated visuals and spontaneous performances (Jean Renoir and Martin Scorcese are two of very few that come to mind).

This issue was one that was at the forefront of my thinking throughout the shoot and one that I was quite specifically experimenting with and trying to resolve. Throughout the film I was trying to avoid the common strategy of shooting improvised dialogue using a hand-held two shot and in other scenes came up with creative visual alternatives. However, with this shot, I had exhausted my novel ideas for coverage and adopted a more conventional approach. I nevertheless was concerned to make sure the camera and sound crews felt their creative, technical and professional needs were being addressed. In this case, after the first take, the camera operator was understandably dissatisfied with how the shot was executed – in relation to the framing at the start, the actors being on the edges of the frame and the mike being in shot. Even though I was happy with the performances in the first take and was reluctant to ask the actors to do it again, we decided to do another take to address these problems. The second take was much better in relation to framing and technical execution but the performances lacked the improvisational qualities of the first take.

Duration: 2'24"

So how do you go about choosing between these two options?

The 'positioning' of the film

Pierre Bourdieu is a sociologist whose focus on practice as a distinct form of knowledge and on the field of cultural production gives him a particular relevance to these issues. According to Bourdieu (1993), all cultural producers take a position within their field, with one of the main issues being their relation to the audience: in simple terms, whether they are making works for a mass commercial audience or an audience of their peers (or what he describes as producing for producers).

With my research, I was interested in exploring the position I was taking in relation to the field of screen production and to what extent both macro and micro decisions I was making throughout the process were determined by this position taking. As I have said, I was explicitly trying to take an alternative position in this production to mainstream professional practice. The film's status as a research project, its micro-budget circumstances and my own personal creative interests influenced this position taking, which in turn informed my decision in this as well as countless other situations. If I was aiming this

film at a mass audience, take 1 would probably not have been regarded as usable, or else only in parts: the various camera and sound problems would have been considered too significant. What is interesting to me is that if take 2 were used, it would have diminished the performances in the finished film, in a subtle but significant way. However, having made the decision that take 1 was the preferred option, there were still obstacles to using it.

Technology and its significance for micro-budget production

Mikes in shot are common in screen production and probably more common on low budget shoots with rushed schedules and less experienced crews. They are a common reason for shooting another take. With enough coverage you can sometimes edit around a mike in shot. However, advances in post-production technology have made it increasingly possible to effectively remove mikes, through masking and painting tools. This is much easier to achieve when the take is a fixed frame or at least shot off a tripod. In the case of take 1 in the shot we are considering, it was handheld, which means every frame of the take was in a different position and any mask covering the mike would have to be animated to change 25 times a second.

Because of my desire to use this take, I decided to attempt to remove the mike in post-production using a widely available visual FX program and, somewhat to my surprise, got effective results after about three hours work.

Duration: 0'12"

What is significant to me in relation to this is that five years ago this would have only been possible if you had a significant budget to go to a high-end facility using expensive technology and skilled operators. Now it can be done with readily accessible software usable on a desktop computer.

This example illustrates one of the key issues in the emergence of a micro-budget production sector, where easy access to low-cost, high-quality technology allows a much greater range of work to be produced and where the previously clear boundaries between professional and non- professional work are being significantly blurred. To me, it also illustrates the issue of to what extent an evaluation of a screen production can be made by viewing the final work. Like many creative practices with a strong craft component, in many cases the successful execution of the process is to make the achievement invisible in the final outcome. While this is a simple and rath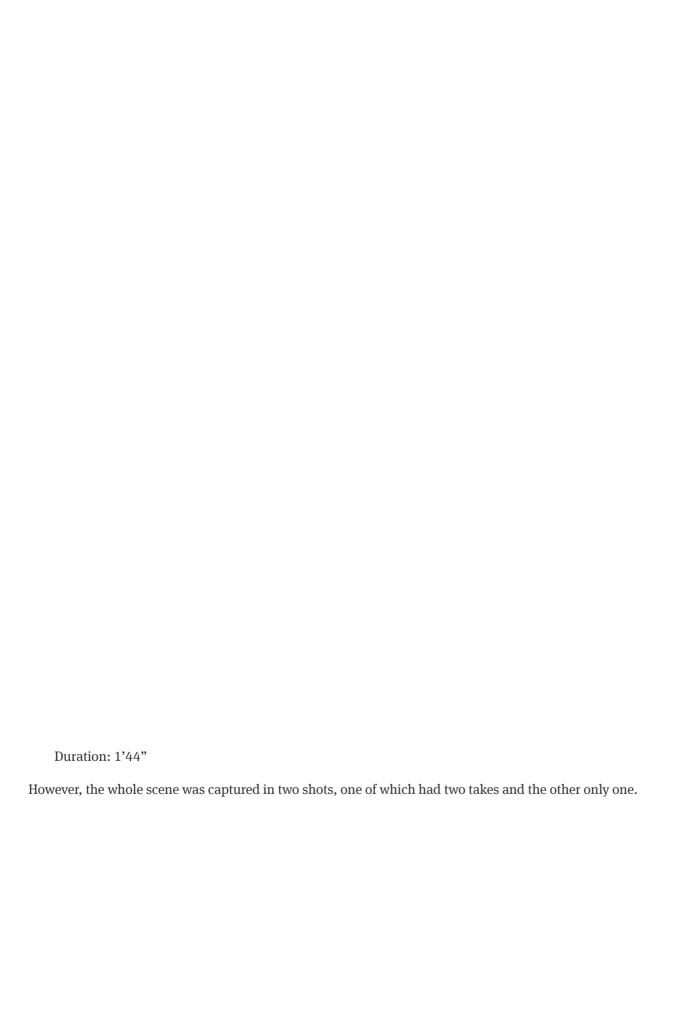er technical example, in my experience some of my most significant achievements as a filmmaker have not been apparent in the final film but reflect an ability to produce acceptable work that doesn't reveal the limited resources and difficult circumstances under which it has been produced. So while the view that the achievement of a screen work can be assessed by viewing the final outcome is a widely accepted one, I would argue that, particularly when the research is looking at the production process, an evaluation of that research should also consider the process.

The pragmatics of filmmaking

Filmmaking is an inherently pragmatic activity. Regardless of budget, there is a constant tension between the creative objectives of the film and the material circumstances under which it is shot, tensions that would conceivably be resolved in quite different ways on different productions. This is frequently a key factor In relation to the decision about the number of takes to do. Doing another take offers the sometimes seductive possibility of a better realised shot, in a context where you commonly identify problems in the edit suite, when it is too late to do anything about them. So there is a powerful 'insurance policy' psychology to this decision – if in doubt, do another take for safety. On the other hand, doing too many takes creates problems for the schedule, in situations where a lot of money is involved or the goodwill of your collaborators is at stake. There are also less tangible negatives such as cast and crew fatigue, where even with goodwill the quality of performances loses something with too much repetition.

With How To Change The World, there was an underlying principle not to do a lot of coverage. When more than one take was shot, the actors were told not to worry about replicating the first take but just to play the scene again. To allow for the possibility of using bits of different takes, a closer angle or a cutaway of some sort was often shot but there was no focus on maintaining continuity. With the Shot Tower scene, a tighter angle of the scene was shot (without the introductory walk in) and the continuity in action was close enough for it to be usable in the final edit.

Duration: 1'44"

However, the whole scene was captured in two shots, one of which had two takes and the other only one.

Duration: 1'51"

Conclusion

What I have been hoping to demonstrate in this paper is that, from the perspective of screen production research, a close analysis of the takes captured in this shot allows a grounded and relevant exploration of the question: why is this film the way it is? I suspect that to many people with production experience, the points being made about this take seem quite obvious, like the type of talk that goes on every day during shoots and in edit rooms. My response is that, if we are looking for a basis on which to develop screen production as a research discipline, it is a positive thing for the content of the research to be recognisable in the experience of screen production practitioners. While it is familiar, what makes it research is that the investigation is done in a way that is sufficiently systematic and rigorous for any conclusions to be defensible as knowledge.

Then what makes the research significant or not is the extent to which this knowledge can be generalised beyond the specific case being studied and is regarded as useful in developing and expanding an understanding of the field. In any particular case, that remains to be seen but, in regard to this, I am very much in agreement with the position advocated by Noel Carroll (1996) in relation to the field of film studies. He points to the problems that have historically beset film

research through the use of grand or top-down theories, arguing for a more local and piecemeal approach, a bottom-up attempt to develop knowledge within the field on a range of different levels and from a range of different perspectives.

If filmmaker/researchers were able to more consistently document, reflect and publish on the process involved in executing their creative ideas, with all the diverse financial, cultural, creative and organisational influences involved, it would seem to me this may be a basis for a distinctive body of knowledge to be developed which, over time, may contribute to a more explicit understanding within our field about effective ways to make films.

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Biography

Leo Berkeley is the Programs Director (Journalism & Media) within the School of Applied 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 has also made a micro-budget feature film called How To Change The World.