

The Bass Girl Project: A Film Production Research Approach to a Problem of Screen Grammar.

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Abstract

This research paper provides background to the Bass Girl Project, a short filmmaking research project that uses film production as a research tool to investigate a question of screen grammar. The paper presents film production research as an alternative to a screen or film studies approach as it explores a development in screen grammar, in which screen direction continuity is rejected and replaced by emotional continuity.

Introduction

In many ways every film is an experiment. We know the process and we know the ingredients, but it is the nature of a creative practice to have uncertainty encoded into practice. We deliberately step back from controlling our creative collaborators as we provide an environment in which their contributions are valued as speculative. We seize upon the happy accident and explore, through editing, variations, sifting possibilities and arriving at something more than the script and more than the sum of creative contribution.

The motivation for making a film is very rarely a question. Questions come later in the form of the how and what of problem solving. The narrative and story provide their own problems, but these problems are not the *sine qua non* of the film. As a way of answering a question, making a film would appear to be an arduous, round-about, and risky method. And yet.... if the question is about films and how they portray the world and reality, and if you happen to be an academic, teaching and researching in screen production, at some point there is going to be a proposition that needs testing. This paper looks at one such proposition that arises from an observation, and presents film making as a logical research method that produces a variety of research and creative outputs, and an example of screen production research.

Using a short film production as a research instrument results in a short film that is considered as both a non-traditional creative research output and data produced by the short filmmaking experiment. Considering the film as data provokes questions around evaluation that can be characterized as, 'What do we know and how do we know it?' This research paper identifies the evaluation problem as one of contextualization, and evaluates the data in the context of its making, thereby enabling the researchers to make statements about filmmaking that have been derived from filmmaking, rather than film watching. In so doing we are using a 'Practitioner Based Enquiry' process as described by McIntyre (2006).

In thinking about film making as research, we are considering film making in terms of Biggs' (2002) reclassification of Christopher Freyling's three ideas of creative practice. In particular the research through art, and the difficult third class, research for art, that Biggs renames work of art. Whilst the film itself may be a work of art, filmmaking is a process, hence the 'research through art'.

In many ways this process is similar to experimentation, and the finished film is the result of the experiment, in which case can we view the film as the results, or data, arising from the process or experiment? For this to be possible we would have to be making the film with the purpose of testing a proposition, and every stage of the film making process would have to be informed by that proposition as part of the reflective practice that includes evaluation.

A Practitioner Based Enquiry allows the researcher to pursue an enquiry that includes and embodies the actions and presence of the researcher. The researcher acknowledges and observes themselves as participants, and agents within a process that takes place within a field of creative endeavour. In which case we must consider the field and process in terms of Csikszentmihalyi's notion of a *Systems Perspective On Creativity* (1999). Csikszentmihalyi's considers the field to be, 'a community of practitioners or gatekeepers', and the domain as the, 'knowledge tools, values and practices'(1999 p4). Using a short film as a research tool places the film making researchers as the community of practitioners or field, as they draw on their understanding of an established film making practice, or the domain, to make and then evaluate the filmmaking experiment

The researchers argue that basing the evaluation not only on the finished film, but also on the practitioners' experience in making the film, allows for general statements about film production and screen grammar, as opposed to non-general statements about audience reaction to a particular film-watching experience.

An Observation

The traditional explanation of why screen direction continuity is important is that it allows an audience to keep track of, and understand, spatial relationships so as to avoid confusion resulting from changes of camera angle. We have observed that modern narrative screen grammar is just as likely to disregard conventions of screen direction continuity as not.

Below is an example from *Friday Night Lights* (Reiner, 2007). Two people meet, the line of action is established between them and the screen direction follows normal patterns.

Towards the end of the conversation the girl turns to leave, whereupon the boy says something to make her pause. For a moment the line is blurred, then re-establishes itself without a two-shot before returning to the original opening line of action as the conversation ends and she walks away.



#1 Opening two shot.



#2 The reverse.



#3 A cut in.



#4 And we are into regular TV coverage.



#5 Perhaps tighter than usual, but...



#6...eye lines match and every thing is 'normal'. The girl then turns to walk away (in this screen grab she has already left frame). But then, cutting on action...



#7, we cross the line. The girl turns back to the boy. The girl continues to turn around,...



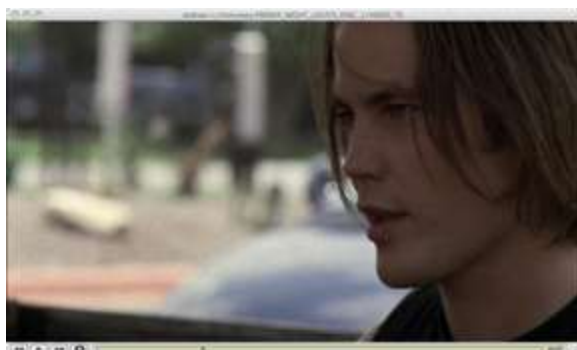
8 ...and looks at the boy, yet her screen direction becomes the same as his.



#9 The cut back to the over the shoulder two-shot shows the boy still in the original line with the original relationship.



10 Yet, for the reverses on her, we continue to be on the ‘wrong’ side of the line as they both face the same way.



#11 When we cut back to him, the new line is established.

The scene finishes with her leaving and a cut back to the original line of action, boy on the left of frame, girl on the right.

Note that there are no cuts-away or cuts-in over the final section, and no neutral screen direction shots. There is an action continuity error in the two-shots that cover her turn away. In shots # 6 & #7 she turns right in one shot and left in the other and the cut is on the action, but our attention is on the boy, so the ‘bad action continuity’ does not result in an awkward edit.

A Discussion of the Observation

This sequence, with its line crossing coverage, is typical for this particular show (which ran for five seasons, ending in February 2011), and as such it does not appear to be a mistake or accidental. It is tempting to right it off as sloppy filmmaking, typical of shows aimed at a teen audience whose brains have turned to mush by MTV and YouTube, but we are loath to label it wrong or bad screen direction continuity, since to do so would be avoiding the question, and lead to a head-in-the-sand approach regarding the evolution of screen language. When students point out this sort of line crossing behaviour and question the 180-degree rule, it is also tempting to resort to platitudes such as, ‘You have to know the rules in order to break them’, or, ‘It is not so much a rule as a guideline’, although these again do not adequately explain what is happening. There is a third option, which is to develop a theory that accounts for our current understanding of screen direction continuity, yet also encompasses the sort of *abandoned* approach that we find in the example above.

Modern audiences do not appear to be confused by breaks in screen direction and continuity. Research into the effect of breaks in perceptual continuity on people watching television for the first time suggests that an audience will ignore breaks in continuity if they are familiar with the process or activity they are watching. Schwan and Ildirar (2010), publishing in the journal, *Psychological Science*, describe an experiment in which subjects, who had never watched film or TV before, were shown films, and the effect of breaks in continuity on comprehension was measured. To find a group that had not seen TV, the researchers had to go to south Turkey. The purpose of the experiment was not to test the effect of continuity but to gain insight into how – given that viewing a film differs from viewing reality – an ill-experienced film viewing audience compares, in terms of comprehension, to an experienced film viewing audience. The researchers found that in situations where the viewers were familiar with the activity or process being shown, breaks in continuity did not adversely impact on comprehension levels in either the experienced or ill-experienced groups. Whilst the researchers were interested in cognitive psychology, for us their results call into question the fixedness of the 180-degree rule, when the audience is familiar with the process or activity being described.

We are not the first to notice that the current film editing vocabulary includes spatial discontinuity and high impact editing. Film editor, Richard Crew, speaking at *The Art Of And Craft Of Film Editing*, a symposium published in *Cineaste* in 2009, describes the evolution of film language,

... When I started to work in dramatic film, I had to learn how to make matched cuts to create a seamless film reality. To keep the viewer within the proscenium arch, I made cuts with motivated, matching movement. That was then. This is now. Forget match cuts. Making cuts impactful, jarring, and shocking is now the MO, in keeping with a high-paced, dissonant world. Among the old canons, an inviolable rule was 'never cross the line,' ... Now it is common to see cuts jump across that line, so both characters are looking the same direction, a technique that used to be considered sloppy and ungrammatical. (Crew and Murch, 2009. p62).

Crew's observations of crossing the line are more 'in keeping with' the likes and expectations of that MTV audience we spoke of earlier. There is no mention of the effect this cutting and jarring has on the viewer; simply that the world of the modern viewer warrants the change of editing style.

In his book *In The Blink of an Eye*, Walter Murch, another contributor to the same symposium, lists six elements of an ideal edit (Murch, 2001). Screen direction continuity is referred to as, 'two dimensional plane of screen (stage line)', and as such is ranked number five in importance, whilst continuity of three-dimensional spatial relationships falls at the bottom of Murch's list. Murch holds that emotion is the most important element in an edit and everything else, including continuity of screen direction and action, is considerably less important. Murch goes on to give a tongue in cheek numerical value to the six items in his list. For him, emotion is 51% of the edit, whilst screen direction and action continuity are 5% and 4% respectively. The fast cutting and hand held camera style of *Friday Night Lights* is an example of Crew's cuts jumping across the line. It is also an example of Murch's emotion edit; the line cross happens at an emotional beat in the scene. It is the 'and another thing' moment in the conversation.

Murch also talks about the importance of the editor not having access to the on-set experience of shooting. This indicates that as an editor, Murch is responding to the shot material. In effect he is making do with what he is provided. *Friday Night Lights* has a similar feel.

The breaks in action and temporal continuity suggest that the editors are responding to the footage provided. The breaks in screen direction continuity are a response to the shot footage as opposed to a planned considered statement. The shooting style allows for this response but, as the breaks in action continuity suggest, the shooting style does not indicate a carefully considered on set approach to breaking screen direction continuity on a shot by shot basis. The possibility of screen direction continuity is included in the shooting style, and the editing takes advantage of this opportunity, the result being an over all style for the show.

In contrast the Ang Lee film *Hulk* (Lee, 2003), provides examples of a considered use of screen direction discontinuity to underscore the emotional content of the scene. In a scene in which Betty, the heroine of the film, learns from her father that there is more to her boyfriend, Bruce Banner/The Hulk, than she knows, we see a very clear lighting continuity that comes from the large window next to the table where the characters are sitting having lunch.



#1 An establishing shot. There are twenty-seven cuts following the establishing shot, as we negotiate a father/daughter relationship.



#2



#3 They sit and chat back and forth, her in a single, him in an over the shoulder two-shot. The General looking left to right at Betty, and Betty looking right to left at the General.



#8 He gets down to business, and we cut to...



#9 “What do you know about your boyfriend?” And the line has been crossed. Suddenly we are on the ‘other side’ of the General and he is now looking right to left at Betty.



#10 The reverse matches the new line, (Better looks right to left at her father). And as we follow the cut and thrust of the conversation, we cut back and forth across the ‘new’ line of action.



#11



#12 Until... left to right cuts straight to...



#13 ...right to left, in terms of eye line.

Towards the end of the scene the shots get tighter and the line is crossed again.



#19



#20



#21

Here another direct cut/line cross occurs.



#22



#27 The scene ends with the General looking thoughtfully out through window.

The edit crosses the line not only with the cuts between the characters, but between the medium close up and close-up shots of the same character. The action continuity is exact, so exact that we wonder if it was shot with two cameras, one on either side of the line of action, suggesting that the line crosses are staged. A conventional reading of the scene explains the line crosses as breaks in Betty's worldview. As her understanding changes, and as she is confronted by difficult truths, (beats in the scene) so the line of action is crossed. The filmmakers appear to be playing with the conventions of screen grammar to add layers of meaning.

Both of the examples given in this paper are scenes of conversations, which when considered in terms of the *Watching Film For The First Time* study, (Schwan and Ildirar, 2006) involve conversations with spatial arrangements that are familiar to the viewer, i.e. sitting at a table or standing next to a car. Neither example causes viewer confusion. Both use breaks in screen direction continuity to underscore the emotional beats of a scene, that is, the moments that progress the narrative and define the scene. In effect we are suggesting that there is an emotional continuity at play, and in the case of the Ang Lee example, a premeditated decision to break screen direction continuity as a visual metaphor to underscore the character's emotional journey.

A Hypothesis:

Considering the observation and the brief discussion, we would like to formulate an hypothesis that builds on Murch's six editing criteria:

Spatial continuity as expressed in the 180-degree rule may be replaced with emotional continuity or, as it were, continuity of emotional space, without causing a loss of audience comprehension, and further, that consideration of emotional continuity adds to the visual language.

Methodology

That we can describe scenes in which filmmakers have broken screen direction continuity, without causing confusion, indicates that it would be possible to investigate emotional continuity using a film studies approach. We could look at multiple examples and make statements about screen grammar based on multiple observations.

Bordwell and Thompson use this approach in their studies of narrative film (Bordwell and Thompson, 1993, Bordwell, 1985). This textual analysis approach works very well and produces statements about how we understand the narrative process and the application of screen grammar. However, limiting the study to a finished film limits its ability to make statements about process or intention. On the other hand, film production gives access to all the decisions and options that lead to the finished film, thereby enabling statements about filmmaking as well as film watching.

Whilst we are interested in testing our hypothesis, we are also interested in looking at filmmaking as a research tool. So the overarching concern of The Bass Girl Project is to test film production as a research method that can produce statements about the actuality of filmmaking. By actuality I mean the things we do, during the production of a film that impact on that film's viewer experience. Put another way, film theory, or film studies, asks what is seen by an audience and how does that impact on the audience's understanding and experience of a film. Film production research asks how does our filmmaking, and the decisions we make in the pre, production and post-production process, impact on an audience's experience?

As a way of testing the hypothesis the researchers developed a short film script and from that script made a short (12.5 minute) film. *Bass Girl* (Authors, 2012) evolves around the difficulties that teens, represented by the character Mim, face when they have to be perfect and maybe try too hard. It is set in a suburban world of high school, rock bands, a busy mum, chores and skating. The film uses mostly non-actors (The mum character played by Leith Arundel is the exception) who were cast for their music or skating ability. All the actors donated their time.

The script was written and developed to work in a three act structure and the film was shot, edited and post produced to make it look like the sort of film that we are used to seeing, that is it looks like a 'normal' movie with a cinematic approach to story telling. It uses metaphor, visual story telling, sound and music. There is action and a song. We didn't want to do this as a lab experiment in a blank studio. That sort of laboratory style filmmaking would not have the emotional space that the observation suggests is necessary. The film had to have a story and look like a film.¹

¹ The film is available at <http://blip.tv/tcupfilms/bass-girl-6479304>

The film making process was conducted with our hypothesis and research question in mind. The research question presents the opportunity to place emphasis on emotional, rather than spatial, continuity. Therefore the film making process included line crossing in the visual vocabulary. This means that during the script analysis stage the researchers identified the story as Mim's story. Each scene was assessed for its moments of change or emotional beats. These are moments in which Mim changes and a list of these beats would correspond to her character arc, and define what each scene was for. This was done as normal pre-production script analysis.

The research question then came into play when we asked *“is this a good moment to include a line cross; are we, at this moment, wanting to enter the inner, emotional world of that character?”*

The question was re-asked during principle photography as the researchers blocked action and designed coverage, and then again during the editing. Editing provided an opportunity to assess the impact of crossing the line on the emotional beats in a scene. The assembly, to rough-cut, to fine cut process forced the researchers to reconsider each scene, scene transitions and the pace of each scene. Whilst one scene, in which Mim almost falls of her bicycle, called for a high impact editing moment, all the other scenes were designed to use seamless edits.

Observation

The research question uses the term emotional continuity. In any film there are two emotional journeys. One is the characters journey. The other is the audience's emotional journey as they watch the character. Sometimes they overlap, for example, on rescuing a princess both the prince and the audience are happy. Sometimes the two emotional journeys do not overlap. This might be due to the audience knowing more than the character, (the audience might know that the princess is not really a princess, for example). Or it might be that the character is sad whilst the audience is happy, because the audience is seeing something about the character that they like, for instance a gallows humour or resolution in the face of adversity.

An example of the audience's emotional journey: During post-production of *Bass Girl* there was pressure to bring the film in at less than seven minutes. The initial assemble was double that, closer to the original script timing, so the cut was not going to be achieved without structural change or removing whole scenes. The first candidates for the chop were those scenes that progressed the character least. A scene in which Mim tries to back out of the band was one of these. After a band rehearsal that did not go well, Mim declares that she is unable to continue with the band. This scene did not progress Mim's emotional journey. There were no emotional shift points in the scene, however, the scene was written to allow the audience to like Mim, to relate to her, and the band's supportive response to Mim allows the audience to see her in a different light; on the basis that if these nice people like her, then the audience should too. In some small way it also allowed Mim to like herself. The scene is an up-beat scene amongst a series of down-beat scenes. It is an example of the audience's emotional journey. It does not contain a line cross since it is not Mim's emotional space that is being activated. In the end the seven-minute plan was rejected and the scene stayed in the film.

Emotional continuity as a term is drawing on the ideas of continuity as expressed in the Hollywood continuity style. Considering emotional continuity in terms of a Soviet style montage we can see a relationship with tonal montage. However whilst there is a sense of Soviet style montage making use of the impact of one shot on the other we don't see a deliberate rejection of spatial continuity within the montage sequence, that is we don't see a repositioning of the spatial and screen relationships between characters, that reveals a beat or moment of change. In *Battleship Potemkin*, Eisenstein uses tonal montage to evoke an audience emotion after the hero's death (Eisenstein, 1925a). The audience is not, at this point, learning more about the hero. The montage is being used to allow the audience to experience sadness and a sense of injustice. The audience is not identifying with the hero so much as the situation. We do find a break in spatial continuity in examples of intellectual montage in which the shot flow momentarily takes the audience outside the world of the film action, cutting to shots that act as commentary on the action. *Strike* provides an example in the intercutting between workers marching towards a confrontation with soldiers and a scene from an abattoir (Eisenstein, 1925b). The effect of the montage is to tell the audience what to think about the situation.

Emotional continuity fits into The Hollywood continuity system, which has the effect of making the shot flow seamless, and thereby allowing and encouraging audience identification with character. The line cross moments in *Bass Girl* and the examples from *Friday Night Lights* and *The Hulk* do not remove the audience from world of the film. They do provide opportunities to push the audience towards an understanding of character by literally showing another point of view.

Results

Using short film making as a research instrument has been successful in that it allows for statements based on the process or actuality of filmmaking. These statements cover observations from pre production to post production. The observations are due to the reflective nature of the practitioner based enquiry, that requires the researchers to interrogate their creative process in terms of the research question, and in the context of their understanding of the creative field, (McIntyre, 2006). The statements are a result of testing, during the editing process, of ideas that were set up in pre production and further developed during principle photography.

On the basis of our film production research, we can state:

- Greatest interruption in the seamless flow of images is caused by the largest eye line shifts, that is, achieving a seamless line cross edit is harder if the audience has to shift attention around the screen. This has implications for camera placement and coverage.
- The wider the angle that is the closer to profile, the greater the displacement or effect of discontinuity. This is related to the previous observation and appears to make sense in terms of emotional continuity, since an audience is expected to identify more with a character if the audience can see more of that character's face. This is working on the same principle as the close up. Shifting from a shot that allows identification to a shot that inhibits that identification, or *vice versa*, will be read as a discontinuous edit.
- Cutting from a single to a dirty single provides for more opportunities for a seamless edit. This could be because of the active frame edge in the dirty single, so the more dynamic 16:9 aspect ratio is helpful.
- Adding line crossing to the accepted vocabulary, or not sticking to the 180-degree rule, does not remove the need for careful and considered editing. That is, it is not a licence to create jump cuts or high impact edits, so the standard 'cut on action' and 'let sound lead vision' rules still apply..

We have used the line crosses to hit the emotional beats in the story and have attached it to character. We feel that this is important because, like all editing decisions, with great power comes great responsibility. Or just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

Discussion

It is tempting, having made the film, to position the filmmaking as an experiment that produces a short film, which could then be shown to a test audience, and that audience surveyed to discover its response to the film. In this way the researchers would know the outcome of the experiment, that is, they would know the answer to their research question. The proposition would either be upheld or disproved using the survey data as evidence. This appears to be a very attractive method of producing quantifiable data. To make it even more attractive the researchers could produce a control version of the film without any line crosses, and run control group surveys. These surveys would tell us about the audience's experience of watching the film. They would also give us an insight into that audience's understanding of screen grammar.

However, whilst the survey option would provide quantifiable data, that data would be based on the audience's film watching activity, in which case we would be using film studies, that is film watching, rather than film production, as a research tool. What is more, this path renders the film making unnecessary since we could show the test audience the sort of examples on which we based our observation. The test audience would be confirming what the researchers had already observed, always supposing that the test audience could be trusted to observe the seamless edits and already had an understanding of screen grammar, which if they did, would make them a non-typical audience. Indeed, showing the examples to screen production colleagues suggests that it is possible that a typical audience, engaged by the emotional continuity, would be carried over the breaks in screen direction continuity without knowing, and only a specialist audience would notice, and then only if they were alerted to watch out for them. Since the researchers are interesting in screen production research, it seems awkward to abandon screen production research when the alternative is altogether problematic.

So rather than survey an audience the researchers incorporated a Practised Based Enquiry approach, as described by McIntyre (2006), into the film-making process. This meant that rather than show an audience a finished film, that is, one particular version, representing one particular set of decisions, the researchers considered the decision making process itself. The picture-editing process in post-production provided opportunities to watch different versions which were made possible by consideration of the question during the pre-production and production stages of the film-making process. The finished film is a response to the research question and that research question informed the reflective process. It is the reflective process in the context of the filmmaker's understanding of the field that enables the researchers to make statements beyond confirming that the 180-degree rule of screen direction continuity is breakable. These are general film making statements as opposed to statements that could be made about the response given by a test audience.

The Practice Based Enquiry allowed the researchers to consciously add one element of screen grammar. By adding the possibility of a break in screen direction to the formal screen grammar, whilst at the same time acknowledging the role of emotional continuity as an alternative to screen direction continuity, the researchers were able to observe the impact across the whole film making process.

Conclusion

The term 'emotional continuity' or 'continuity of emotional space' builds on and articulates ideas that have until now been outside a formal screen language or screen grammar. The Bass Girl Project has used a methodology of a Practice Based Enquiry applied to Film Production Research to explore a problem that was derived from an observation suggesting that the existing screen grammar was inadequate.

If we are to think of screen production as using a language, for example the language of cinema, it is comforting to know that, as a language, it appears to be evolving and responding to the needs of different users, technologies and formats. As such it is a living language. We can also think of this language as having variants. Using the cited examples we can see a more formal grammar as used in the Ang Lee film and a more relaxed grammar in *Friday Night Lights*. The research film sits somewhere between these two variants in that it has some of the twitchy excitement of the teen drama *Friday Night Lights* and some of the more formally composed moments that we see in the *Hulk*. This suggests that, as with most things, with great power comes great responsibility and just because you can does it mean you should?

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