

Aesthetic Possibilities of Cinematic Improvisation

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Contrary to the skepticism of some authors about the artistic potential or even the possibility of films being improvised artworks, I argue that not only is it conceptually possible for many elements of the filmmaking process to be performed in an improvisatory manner, but that a number of existing films and filmmaking practices provide examples of the realization of such possibilities. Further, I argue that these examples show that improvisation by filmmakers can enhance the aesthetic or artistic value of a film. As well as its artistic potential, I consider some social and ethical implications of improvisatory approaches to filmmaking, and by extension to art in general.

Keywords: Improvisation, improvised filmmaking, philosophy of film, cinema aesthetics, social aesthetics.

1. *Introduction*

In 1980 Virginia Wexman noted that filmmakers' use of improvisation¹ has received little critical attention, and since then the question of improvisation in cinema has continued to be largely unaddressed, both by philosophers of art and by scholars writing on film in other disciplines. In the philosophy of art, this should be understood in the context of a general lack of attention to improvisation, where most of what philosophers have written on improvisation has focused on music.² In

¹ My focus will be on fictional narrative cinema, bracketing documentary and experimental film, partly to keep the paper to a manageable length but also because the authors I respond to focus on fictional narrative films.

² On the scarcity of philosophical articles on improvisation, see Alpers 2014, and note that where Alpers shows a disparity between articles in aesthetics journals on music and those dealing with musical improvisation, topic searches in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, and the *British Journal of Aesthetics* (as of April, 2018) show that, of those articles that

writing on film from other disciplines, including ‘film theory’ and more practically-focused books on filmmaking, there is slightly more to be found, although nearly all is in reference to specific filmmakers with reputations for having their actors improvise, such as John Cassavetes or Mike Leigh. Less than a handful of papers discuss improvisation in cinema more generally, with their authors—Wexman (1980), Berkeley (2011), and Froger (2017)—also focusing primarily on actors’ performances and dialogue, without considering *other* ways in which a film might be improvised, in addition to the acting.³

With this paper I hope to demonstrate that improvisation in the medium of cinema is not only an issue of philosophical and aesthetic interest, meriting greater attention than has hitherto been paid to it, but that improvisational filmmaking practices can be artistically valuable and can result in aesthetically rich audience experiences.⁴ I consider how filmmaking can involve improvisation in ways that include, but go beyond, a film’s actors improvising, looking at opportunities for those ‘behind the scenes’—e.g. camera operators, editors, directors, etc.—to improvise in their roles in creating a film. How does counting films among improvised artworks affect our understanding of improvisation or of cinema as an art form? As well as the potential artistic value of such practices, what social or ethical possibilities might be realized by improvisational approaches to filmmaking instead of the traditional model employed in the mainstream commercial filmmaking industry as well as in many independent and student productions?⁵

deal with improvisation in the arts, the majority of them discuss improvisation in music as opposed to other art forms (cf. Bresnahan 2014).

³ The exception to this is Sterritt (2000). While Froger notes that a cameraperson recording improvising actors must adapt to their performances and so must also improvise, she doesn’t explore this point further. As for practical writing on filmmaking, Michael Rabiger’s *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics* (2003), which is otherwise open to alternative approaches, mentions improvisation only in the context of working with actors, mainly in terms of ‘warm ups’ in rehearsals or collaborative story creation (Rabiger 2003: 114–18, 164–66), with no discussion of how other elements of a film might be improvised.

⁴ This is not to say that taking an improvisatory approach to making a film will always, or even often, lead to an artistically or aesthetically positive result—only that it can, and that when it does, *what* the results are and *how* they work (and what this can tell us about cinema more broadly) are worth attending to.

⁵ In this ‘traditional model’, films are scripted and largely pre-determined in their content and form (e.g. through storyboarding), with the production involving a hierarchical division of labour. Finding citations to support my claim that this model is employed in most independent and student productions (at least in North America) would be possible but time-consuming and, ultimately, no less anecdotal than references to my own experience. I will simply note that in my experience on low-budget film shoots during and after film school, the degree to which people felt they had to imitate ‘Hollywood’ or television industry methods of production, when there was no external pressure to do so and when they thought they were doing something ‘alternative’, was striking.

Before discussing what improvisational approaches to filmmaking can involve, it is necessary to address arguments against the claim that films *can* be improvised in any meaningful sense, and against the potential for improvisation in filmmaking to be of artistic value. I begin in §2 by defending the possibility of a genuinely improvised film and its potential for artistic value against criticisms from Marianne Froger and, to a lesser extent, Wexman. After showing their arguments for these criticisms to fail, in §3 I draw on Gilbert Ryle's (1976) broad understanding of improvisation along with more recent work on improvisation in the philosophy of art by Philip Alperson (1984, 1998), David Davies (2004, 2011), and Aili Bresnahan (2014, 2015), to offer an account of what it takes for a particular work to count as *an improvised artwork*.⁶ In §4, I discuss how various elements of the filmmaking process might be improvised in this sense, and explore their potential for contributing positively to a film's artistic value, considering the effect they can have on viewers' experiences of a film and the difference this can make to how non-improvised films are typically experienced. I conclude in §5 by considering the social or ethical potential of these forms of cinematic improvisation.

2. *Challenges to the possibility and artistic potential of improvised cinema*

In "Improvisation in New Wave Cinema: Beneath the Myth, the Social" (2017), Marianne Froger argues that statements made by New Wave filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard concerning the improvised status of their films were largely false, and "[i]n fact, improvisation was rarely practiced" (Froger 2017: 235). Even if true,⁷ her contention that these films weren't improvised, or weren't to the extent that their makers claimed, would not count against the possibility that other films might have been, or that films in general can be improvised in their creation. Still, Froger presents three criticisms in the course of her discussion that cast doubt on the possibility of a genuinely improvised film, or, assuming such a film were possible, on its potential to be artistically successful.

2.1 *Froger's three challenges*

The first challenge follows from her definition of improvisation as "the act by which one simultaneously composes and executes a musical piece or ... simultaneously composes and utters dialogue" (Froger 2017: 234) and her additional claim that this definition "emphasizes the simultaneity of the time of invention, execution, and audience re-

⁶ For simplicity, I use 'artworks' to refer to objects (paintings, poems, scores, etc.) and to performances, bracketing the question of whether a performance of a scripted or scored work is itself a distinct work of art.

⁷ Unfortunately Froger provides little evidence to back up this claim.

ception” (Froger 2017: 234). Since there is nearly always⁸ a temporal gap between a film’s composition and execution and its reception by audiences, with the film’s ‘composition’ including the selection and editing of shots from all the footage recorded, Froger suggests that it is impossible for cinema to be a genuinely improvisational art form, even if the actors were improvising, or if some other form of improvisation occurred during filming.

The second challenge counts against the possibility that any improvisation that occurred in front of the camera can contribute to a film’s artistic properties, since even if “improvisation in what is filmed, or in the act of filming itself” does occur, it “is very difficult to detect in the viewing of a film” due to the absence of ‘codes’ or representational conventions to signal that what an audience is encountering was improvised (Froger 2017: 234). As such, part of a film that wasn’t improvised might look as if it had been, and could be carefully staged to give viewers the impression of spontaneity without being spontaneously produced. While this objection allows that improvising can take place during a film’s creation, by challenging whether it can be relevant to our experience or appreciation of the finished film, it counts against the possibility that a cinematic work overall can be *an improvised artwork* in any robust sense.

Froger’s third challenge, a version of which is also found in Wexman, holds that even if improvisation occurs during parts of the filmmaking process, and even if viewers are aware that what they are watching was improvised, this awareness is likely to contribute *negatively* to the film’s artistic value. Froger claims that improvisation “would have to remain invisible in order that it not break what film theorists have called the ‘effect of the real’ of the cinematic image” (Froger 2017: 236), referring to an alleged disposition of the medium to lead viewers to experience the characters and events they are encountering as if they are real and being witnessed through an invisible window or ‘fourth wall’. Froger suggests that this failure to maintain the ‘effect of the real’ “explains the commercial failure of Truffaut’s second film [*Tirez sur la pianiste/Shoot the Piano Player* (1962)], which was much more characterized by improvisation than his first” (Froger 2017: 236). Similarly, Wexman writes that improvised scenes “can detract from a film’s impact by presenting experience that has not been shaped with an audience in mind” (Wexman 1980: 30), faulting directors such as Casavetes and Jacques Rivette for being “insensitive to the desirability of making their creation accessible to [the] public” and for “indulging the actors at the expense of the audience’s needs” (Wexman 1980: 31). The worry is that if improvisation is detected in a film (and hence could count as part of the film’s artistic properties) it will risk alienating

⁸ Exceptions include live television or internet broadcasts, which Froger doesn’t consider. However, artworks in this form are rare, and are beyond the scope of her concern with French New Wave filmmaking.

viewers by straying too far from familiar cinematic conventions, or by lacking the technical polish that Froger and Wexman take to contribute positively to a film's artistic value.

Taken together, these criticisms cast doubt on whether films can be genuinely improvised artworks, given the nature of the cinematic process, including the temporal gap between creation and reception and the role played by editing, and, if they can be, on whether this possibility would be worth realizing. Even if the first challenge were to be met and cinema was demonstrated to be an artform that allowed for works to be improvised, the other two challenges would still need to be addressed in order to show that the possibilities for improvisation that cinema allowed were worth attending to. Fortunately, all three can be met by showing that the arguments given for them are flawed, requiring the acceptance of positions that are too strong or implausible.

2.2 *Response to the second challenge*

Froger's second challenge—i.e. that improvisation during the making of a film can't be artistically relevant because audiences can't know that what they are seeing was improvised, since an improvised performance could be perceptually indistinguishable from a scripted one—is too strong, since it would also count against improvised live musical or theatrical performances, for which there are also no distinct 'forms of representation' that allow audiences to know that what they are seeing or hearing is being spontaneously generated as opposed to having been pre-scripted and rehearsed to appear spontaneous. Musical performances (e.g. some of Anthony Braxton's or John Zorn's pieces) can be thoroughly composed and tightly rehearsed but designed to sound extemporaneous and free-form, or even disorganized, as can theatrical performances. Even when there are established practices or 'codes' in a genre that would signal to knowledgeable audience members that what they see or hear is improvised, these could also be incorporated into a script or composition and be part of a pre-planned work rather than an actual improvisation. For instance, a performance done in the style of a Second City comedy improv could make use of actors planted in the audience who suggest themes on which the actors then appear to improvise, with everything, including the on-stage actors' solicitation of themes from the audience and the ersatz audience member's suggestions, being part of the script. Thus, the fact that a film's audience might only be aware that what they were watching had a feeling of spontaneity, but be unable to *know* that what they were seeing was improvised, does not count against the possibility or artistic relevance of improvisation in cinema without also counting against the possibility or artistic relevance of improvisation in *any* medium.

Furthermore, this challenge assumes that only those features of an artwork that are manifest to audiences are relevant for that work's artistic value, but this is also implausible, since it would discount any

aspects of a work's creation that were not perceivable in the finished product. However, aspects of a work's creation can generate the perceptible properties of the finished work, and so can be artistically relevant for the work's ontological status and its aesthetic value, without themselves being perceptible. One example would be the choice of lens, shutter speed, or film stock for a particular shot; while such a choice affects how the shot will look, and so should count as an artistically relevant choice, an audience member seeing the shot in the finished film will not be able to perceive the technical choice that resulted in what they are seeing, especially since the same effect can result from digital manipulation during editing, with digital filters mimicking the look of certain film stocks or lens types. Additionally, facts about the creative process that are not manifest in, and don't directly lead to the appearance of, an artwork can still be relevant for the status and artistic value of that work. The fact that Rodin initially conceived of his sculpture of Balzac as a nude before deciding to present the figure draped in a form-concealing cloak is relevant for understanding and evaluating this sculpture, even though this aspect of the work's history can't be seen from viewing the finished sculpture.⁹

2.3 *Response to the third challenge*

If this is right, then, assuming Froger's first challenge can be met and that it is possible for films to be improvised artworks, the fact that a film was improvised will be relevant for a proper understanding of it as an artwork and hence for a proper evaluation of its artistic value. This leaves open the possibility, however, that it will count *negatively* towards its artistic value, so Froger's third challenge—also raised by Wexman—still needs to be met in order to show that improvisation is an artistically interesting or desirable possibility for filmmakers to avail themselves of. However, it isn't difficult to meet this challenge, since both Froger and Wexman appear to conflate *commercial* success, or audience popularity, with *artistic* quality. This can be seen most clearly in Froger's point about Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*—the fact that it was less financially successful than Truffaut's first film, *Les quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows* (1959), or even less successful with critics at the time, does not count against its *artistic* quality; critical judgment can be mistaken, especially when a work is new, and when it comes to audience popularity, the 'customer' can be wrong. While *Shoot the Piano Player* may not be as artistically successful as *The 400 Blows*, whether or not it has less commercial success because it featured more improvisation doesn't mean its artistic value will be lower for the same reason.

⁹ For the example of Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* and the aesthetic relevance of the history of a work's creation, see Wollheim (1980: 188–99). See also Davies (2006) contra the 'aesthetic empiricism' Froger must presuppose in order to hold that properties of an artwork must be perceptible in order to be relevant for its artistic value.

While Wexman is right to maintain that improvisation requires discipline to carry out in a way that is artistically successfully when presented to an audience rather than occurring privately in rehearsal, and that simply making things up at random can result in incoherence and artistic failure (Wexman 1980: 30–31), this is no more a problem for improvisation in cinema than in other artforms.¹⁰ In order to avoid incoherence, jazz musicians will also need to improvise with discipline and active attention to what they are doing at any moment, to how it fits with what they've just done, and to where it might be leading in terms of possible directions for the development of themes or ideas contained in what they're currently playing, and must do so on the basis of skill and a strong working knowledge of their art form.¹¹ Moreover, a work that can seem incoherent to an audience can in fact be internally coherent, highly complex, and artistically successful, with the audience missing these features of the work because of its novelty or its failure to conform to expectations based on familiar patterns from other works. As Eric Lewis (2017) describes, the genre-mixing improvisations performed by the Art Ensemble of Chicago in Paris in 1969 were initially met with confusion by critics and many audience members, although what appeared at first to some as incoherence was understood by others in terms of complex aesthetic strategies of hybridity and what Lewis calls “aesthetic thickening” (Lewis 2017: 135–36). This shows how a work that is coherent on its own criteria can be mistaken for ‘mere chaos’ by those who expect it to follow a criterion of coherence alien to that particular work.

Thus, even if an artwork—whether improvised or not—is coherent and artistically successful, it can be mistakenly judged to be incoherent by audiences who fail to apprehend what the work is in fact doing and instead assume its author was aiming to do something else, but failing.¹² This suggests that the problem Wexman claims for the directors she cites—Cassavetes, Robert Altman, and D. A. Pennebaker—may in fact be a problem with the audience members’ reception and judgment of their films, and not a problem with the films or the filmmakers’ practices. In Kendall Walton’s terms in his “Categories of Art” (1970), this would be a matter of an audience member approaching, experiencing, and evaluating a work as if it belonged to one ‘category’—e.g. ‘scripted classical narrative film’—when it belongs to, and is properly judged within, another ‘category’—e.g. ‘improvised ensemble film’. The same properties of a work that, in Walton’s terms, count as ‘standard’ and ‘contra-standard’ for one category could count as the reverse for another.

¹⁰ This is also no more a problem for *improvisation* than for any artistic technique or method, since each requires discipline or at least judgment to employ successfully, and any can be used poorly, resulting in artistic failure.

¹¹ Cf. Alperson (1984: 22): “Even the freest improviser, far from creating *ex nihilo*, improvises against some sort of musical context.”

¹² Cf. McLuhan (1964: 239): “When they are initially proposed, new systems of knowledge do not look like improvements and innovations. They look like chaos.”

er (see Walton 1970: 338–42). For instance, scenes between characters in classical narrative films standardly contain non-overlapping dialogue where each character, in turn, clearly and concisely articulates a statement which is made in order to further that character's goals and dramatic motivation in both the scene and the narrative overall.

Where it might be a 'mistake' for a film *in this category* to contain a scene of dialogue that 'goes nowhere' or in which actors deliver lines in a way that makes it difficult for the audience to hear every word, these things might not be contra-standard, but might in fact be standard, for scenes in a film of a different type made with different artistic aims. Hence, it can be a category mistake on the viewer's part to judge an extended scene of dialogue in, say, Cassavetes' *Husbands* (1970), Jacques Rivette's *Out 1* (1971), or Altman's *Nashville* (1975), in which characters talk over one another, struggle to express themselves, and speak and act without 'advancing the plot', as being artistically flawed if this judgment is based on their approaching the film with the expectation that it will be like other films with which they are more familiar and that it will aim to do what these films do. Such expectations can get in the way of the viewer seeing what the film *is* doing, and seeing how such a scene can be 'meaningful' or even coherent in a different way. Just as improvised musical or theatrical performances call for different forms of engagement and evaluation by audiences, even if the fact of improvisation is not directly perceptible without some background knowledge of the process by which it is produced, and just as certain properties that might count as artistic flaws in a non-improvised work might not count as such for an improvised one (cf. Sparshott 1982: 255), films that make use of improvisation will call for being experienced and judged differently than traditionally scripted films.

So far my responses to these challenges have assumed that films can be genuinely improvised artworks, where this is what Froger's first challenge calls into question. This challenge still needs to be addressed in order to fully counter Froger's skepticism about improvised cinema.

2.4 *Response to the first challenge*

With regard to this challenge—that the temporal gap between a film's creation and its reception, including the editing that the recorded images and sounds go through, do not allow for films to be improvised artworks—it is puzzling that the definition of improvisation on which this challenge is based limits improvisation to musical pieces and to dialogue. It is also odd that Froger claims her definition "emphasizes the simultaneity of ... audience reception" with creation and execution (Froger 2017: 234), when it makes no mention of audience reception. Nevertheless, assuming that Froger accepts the possibility of improvisation with respect to more than just music and dialogue, such as dance, or an actor's movements and not just speech, her position would seem to be *either* that two things—composition and execution—*or* that

three—these, plus audience reception—must be simultaneous for improvisation.

The latter position, which is what she seems to endorse when read literally, would entail that recorded as opposed to live musical performances can't be improvisations, but this seems false and fails to accord with actual practices surrounding improvised music.¹³ It is implausible to hold that a listener who is present at a performance of a free improvisation hears an improvised piece of music, but that someone listening to a live recording of the performance after it has occurred, and who hears the same sounds, does not. Hence, a definition of improvisation that requires all three factors to be simultaneous is not plausibly tenable. But if only the simultaneity of a work's composition and its execution are taken to be necessary for that work to count as improvised,¹⁴ there is no reason to discount the possibility of a film being an improvised artwork so long as what was recorded, and what the viewer subsequently sees, was something the improviser came up with in the moment of recording. Thus, in order to succeed, Froger's objection would need to rest on an implausibly narrow definition of improvisation, and so the possibility of improvisational cinema cannot be discounted for this reason.

Even if the temporal delay between a work's composition and execution and its reception doesn't discount it from being an improvised artwork, the fact that a film's composition encompasses more than the camera recording what is occurring in front of it, including the selection and editing of the recorded material later in the production process, could be seen to raise a further challenge to the possibility of a film as a whole being an improvised artwork. This may be the point of Froger's comment about how the "after-the-fact construction of a story's spatio-temporal continuity" (Froger 2017: 234–35) can impede the audience's ability to encounter, *as improvisation*, any improvising recorded by the camera. And more than just the story's spatio-temporal continuity can be constructed during the editing of a film, including interactions between characters. Actors can be filmed on separate occasions speaking their lines to an empty room and the shots cut together to present an interactive conversation between the characters, and even the expressive tone of the 'performance' of a single actor can be created through combining different takes, when the actor's performance lacked this tone in any one of these takes. What the audience encounters as *the cinematic work* is ultimately the result of the editing process and not just, or primarily, of what went into recording the parts that are edited, with many of the work's artistic properties having to do with the selec-

¹³ A frequently discussed, and useful, example of a record of an improvised musical performance where listening to the record is widely accepted as listening to an improvisation is Keith Jarrett's 1975 *Köln Concert*. See Davies (2011: 135–43) for a discussion of this work and the issue of recordings of improvised performances.

¹⁴ This would allow for recorded music that no one other than the performer(s) hear(s) in the moment of its playing/recording to count as improvised, which certainly seems plausible.

tion and arranging of recorded images, and the combination of these with sounds that are recorded separately and subjected to further editing and rearrangement. As such, it might seem that even if improvisation occurred in the moment of filming, a film *qua* film cannot *itself* be an improvised, rather than a designed and planned, artwork.

While this objection wouldn't discount the possibility of a film that consisted of a single unbroken shot being an improvised work if the acting and filming of this take were improvised, such films are rare, and restricting cinematic improvisation to these films would be overly limiting. A definition that included only these films would exclude nearly all of the films that in practice are considered to have been improvised, whether those by Cassavetes and Rivette mentioned by Wexman, the ensemble comedies of Christopher Guest (*Best in Show* [2000]) or Chris Lillie (*Summer Heights High* [2007]), or more recent independent 'mumblecore' and 'micro-budget' films by directors such as Joe Swanberg (*Hannah Takes the Stairs* [2007], *Nights and Weekends* [2008]), Aaron Katz (*Quiet City* [2007]), Chris Smith (*The Pool* [2007]), and Sean Garrity (*Zoey & Adam* [2009], *Blood Pressure* [2012]). As David Davies has argued in favour of what he calls the "pragmatic constraint" (Davies 2004: 17–20), when an ontological theory of art contrasts with how practitioners understand what they are doing or making, the burden of proof is on the advocate of the 'revisionary' position to present an 'error theory' explaining the misunderstanding. While Froger claims something like this with respect to Godard's early films, more support is needed for this claim than Froger gives for it to meet the aforementioned burden of proof in Godard's case—and it still wouldn't count against others' claims that their films were improvised to some significant extent.

Additionally, the objection relies on two assumptions that may be common but which are not beyond question: (i) that an artwork counts as an improvised work only if *all* of its constitutive and artistically relevant properties result from simultaneous composition and execution; and (ii) that the selection, arrangement, and editing of material is incompatible with improvisation, or is not something that can *itself* be improvised. If these assumptions are rejected—and both are challenged by Sterritt (2000) in his consideration of the writing practices of Beat authors Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs alongside paradigmatic examples of improvisation by bebop musicians—it opens the way for allowing genuinely improvised cinematic works. Ultimately, in order to endorse *or* oppose Froger's challenges, and so to answer the question "Can films be improvised artworks?", the questions of what makes any artwork count as an improvised work, and how this might apply to cinematic works in particular, must be answered.

3. *What makes an artwork an improvised work?*

Some artworks can include improvised elements without plausibly counting as improvised works on the whole—e.g. a concerto that in-

cludes an improvised cadenza but which it not otherwise improvised by its performers—whereas others such as Jarrett’s *Köln Concert* more plausibly count as improvised works. Distinguishing between improvised artworks and artworks that merely involve some amount of improvisation requires a theory of improvisation in general. Gilbert Ryle (1976) presents an account of improvisation in relation to everyday actions and speech, emphasizing that his account goes beyond any special concern with artistic creation (Ryle 1976: 69–70). For Ryle, improvisation is a central part of intelligence having to do with our ability to be innovative, original, and unmechanical in thinking and acting. This is a factor in all ‘higher-level’ thinking, which Ryle argues cannot simply be a matter of direct step-by-step progression from one thought to another but must involve a certain degree of ‘ad hockery’ (Ryle 1976: 71–72). We improvise, in this sense, when we respond to a particular situation in an unplanned and unrehearsed way, not following any prior model; “in a conversation or a debate, since what I am to say to you next depends partly on how you are going to complete your current sentence, *I can harbour no internal ‘tape’* already impressed with my impending remark or retort” (Ryle 1976: 74, my emphasis).

Such action is intentional insofar as we are not acting unconsciously or automatically from habit, but is, as he puts it, a “*thinking-up* of a wanted something without the execution of any successive pieces of *thinking-out* or *thinking-over*” (Ryle 1976: 71, my emphasis). While our action will not be entirely without precedent, drawing on our past experience and the “know-how” we’ve gained from it (Ryle 1976: 77), it will be particular to the occasion on which it is done or uttered; “[t]o a partly novel situation”, he notes, “the response is necessarily partly novel, else it is not a response” (Ryle 1976: 73). Since in everyday life we frequently act or speak without carrying out the steps of a pre-formed, *specific* plan ‘to a T’, but instead think *as* we act or speak, modifying as we go any ‘plan’ we may have had in mind, improvisation is an everyday ability that every mentally competent adult will exercise to some degree. As Ryle puts it, improvisation is essentially the capacity to be “not a tram, but a bus” (Ryle 1976: 69)—i.e. not to be limited to following a track laid down in advance, in a fixed direction and towards a predetermined destination, but to be able to choose, and to change, one’s course.

When applied to artistic creation and performance, Ryle’s account supports Froger’s emphasis on the simultaneity of composition and execution, if ‘execution’ is understood as making the choices and carrying out the actions that go into forming, or performing, a work, and if composition is understood as ‘invention’ or ‘planning’, i.e. as conceiving, contemplating, and deliberating about these choices and actions and their anticipated results.¹⁵ This fits Alperson’s definition of improvisa-

¹⁵ While Froger most frequently uses the term ‘composition’, she also uses ‘invention’ synonymously, and seems to mean by both something equivalent to ‘conception’, ‘planning’, or ‘designing’.

tion as spontaneity in creation (Alperson 1984: 17), along with Curtis Carter's similar characterization of improvisation as involving the "suspension of set structures for a practice and the introduction of non-traditional elements [requiring] the power to invent new forms spontaneously" (Carter 2000: 181), and Aili Bresnahan's definition of improvisational artistry as "thinking-while-doing [...] a sort of spontaneous agency that involves both conscious and spontaneous artistic choices that take place during performance" (Bresnahan 2014: 87, 91).¹⁶ Spontaneous creation is not creation *ex nihilo*, but creation resulting from a set of actions that was not entirely pre-meditated but was conceived and intended by the agent in the moment of carrying them out. On all the accounts mentioned above, we can say that a part of an artwork is improvised insofar as the artist conceives of that part of the work as being a certain way (composition) *in the course of* performing the action that realizes it in this way (execution), rather than following a pre-existing plan. For instance, part of a musical performance will be improvised if and only if what the musician is playing is not 'thought out' in advance, but 'thought up' in the moment *as* she is playing it; likewise, part of a painting will be improvised if and only if the decision to apply a particular colour to a particular part of the canvass with a particular manner of brush stroke, etc., occurs simultaneously with the painter's hand and arm moving the brush in this manner.

If a creative decision is improvised when it is unpremeditated in this way, then most, and arguably all, artistic creation involves improvisation to some degree. Regarding dance, Bresnahan argues that "the setting and conditions of a live performance *always* require the performer to be aware of his or her performing environment in an 'on-line' way, *making on-the-spot adjustments* either to improve a performance or to correct a problem if something goes wrong" (Ryle 1976: 92, my emphasis). Even live dance performances done according to a pre-established choreography, she notes, involve *some* improvising in how the dancers move to interpret the choreography in the moment, insofar as their movements aren't mechanical reproductions of the choreographer's instructions and insofar as interpretation is involved in translating these instructions into actual bodily movements. Similarly, Gould and Keaton argue that this holds for musical performance and score interpretation, and R. Keith Sawyer goes further to argue that, at least on certain understandings of art such as those found in Dewey (1934) and Collingwood (1938), *all* artistic creation involves improvisation in Ryle's sense, at some point in the creative process, insofar as the work is a (new) creation and not a reproduction of an already-existing form (Sawyer 2000: 152). Despite his distaste for aesthetics, Ryle agrees, noting that "verse composition cannot be merely a well-drilled opera-

¹⁶ Gould and Keaton (2000) challenge spontaneity as a necessary part of improvisation, but see Davies (2011: 151–54) for a reply to Gould and Keaton and a defence of spontaneity being a necessary part of improvisation.

tion [since] if Wordsworth's seventh sonnet had been a repetition of his sixth sonnet, it would not have been a new sonnet, and so not have been a new composition" (Ryle 1976: 70).

This may explain what it is for an artist to improvise during part of the creation of a work, and so for part of a work to be improvised, but we need more to classify an artwork as *an improvised artwork* overall. I suggest that this is a matter of degree and that it is helpful to think of a spectrum with works that involve a faithful adherence to a pre-existing plan or model at one extreme—e.g. a hyperrealist painting made by copying a blown-up photograph, like Chuck Close's *Self Portrait*—and works for which *all* artistically significant properties are the result of simultaneous and spontaneous invention and execution—e.g. Jarrett's *Köln Concert*—at the other. A work as a whole, then, will be more or less improvised *qua* artwork to the extent that more or fewer of its artistically relevant properties are brought about through improvisation on the part of the artist(s), and to the extent that the properties so brought about contribute to the artistic character and value—whether positive or negative—of the work itself. Not *all* of a work's aesthetically relevant properties need to result from improvisation, then, in order for the work to count as *an improvised work*, just some significant number, and to some significant degree. What this number and degree are, and what will count as significant, will plausibly differ from one work to another, and it is plausible that they will be relative to the medium and genre of the work; the criteria for determining what will count as an improvised dance or musical performance may differ from the criteria for determining what will count as an improvised painting or novel. While the exact threshold may be 'fuzzy', the standards established within a particular practice and for a particular medium or genre can go some way towards settling whether certain works are improvised—e.g. many Charlie Parker solos—or whether they merely involve improvisation—e.g. concertos featuring cadenzas.

One virtue of this definition of improvised artworks is that it is open enough to include many works that are generally considered improvised but which a stronger account that required *all* aspects of a work to be simultaneously invented and executed would exclude, without having to include *every* original artwork, given the distinction between improvised works and works involving improvisation. Another is that it allows for different artforms to have different criteria for works to count as improvised. The lack of attention paid by philosophers of art to improvisation in certain artforms may be due to an assumption that the criteria for what counts as improvisation in artforms based in live performance, such as music, dance, and theatre, are the criteria for all artistic improvisation, leading to artforms that result in 'products' rather than performances—e.g. painting, literature, etc.—being thought not to admit of improvised works. This difference between performance-based and product-based artforms, and of how they are commonly thought of in relation to improvisation, is noted by Sawyer, who

suggests that this has to do with what *execution* in these artforms involves. “Product creativity generally involves a long period of creative work leading up to the creative product,” he writes, while “in improvisational performance, the creative process *is* the product; the audience is watching the creative process as it occurs” (Sawyer 2000: 149). Cinema is a medium of ‘product creativity’ in this sense, with the creation and execution of a film involving a drawn-out process of pre-production, production, and post-production, with the activities and decisions made at each stage being meant to result in a fixed product, i.e. a film.

To determine how a film might be an improvised artwork, then, we need to ask what it would mean for something created over a length of time, usually with temporal breaks in the processes of composition and execution, and which results in a fixed product, to be improvised. Sawyer’s example of a five hour improvised painting session by Picasso (Sawyer 2000: 149–50) is relevant to consider, as are Sterritt’s examples of the ‘improvisatory’ writing of Kerouac and Burroughs (Sterritt 2000: 163–64, 167–69). In the case of Picasso, Sawyer suggests that a painting is an improvised artwork just in case the artist’s process of painting it is done “free-form, without preconceived image or composition” (Sawyer 2000: 149). Regarding the Beat authors, Sterritt notes that Kerouac’s self-styled ‘spontaneous writing’ may not have been entirely separate from or opposed to “planning, deliberation, pre-conceptualization, and other mental activities that are [not] wholly spontaneous ... in the ways suggested by idealized discourses of extemporaneous invention” (Sterritt 2000: 163). He argues, however, that “a look at the actual methodologies of some paradigmatic practitioners,” such as bebop musicians, “suggests that spur-of-the-moment creation may not be nearly as divorced from preconceived ideas, prerehearsed techniques, and prearranged effects as its advocates frequently appear to believe” (Sterritt 2000: 164). Musical improvisers, e.g. Parker, draw on personal repertoires of musical phrases made familiar through practice, so accepting their performances as improvised requires accepting that improvisation, *qua* in-the-moment composition, is not opposed to *some* amount of “preparation and precomposition”, even in the genres of musical performance most commonly accepted as improvisational (Sterritt 2000: 166). Hence, Sterritt implies, the presence of a degree of preparation and precomposition in the practices of the Beat writers, including Burroughs’ use of existing materials to which he gave coherence through rearranging and revising, should not automatically count against claims that their writing was spontaneous or improvised in its execution.

These examples show that: (i) if the creative process that results in a finished product is improvised, the product itself can count as an improvised artwork even though it is fixed and enduring in a way that a live performance is not; and (ii) a creative process can involve improvisation alongside some amount of preparation or even precomposition of some parts of the work, alongside ‘on-the-fly’ revision. On the definition offered above, the resulting work will count as an improvised work

provided that enough of the work's salient artistic properties result from improvisation in the creative process and not from precomposition, with what counts as 'enough' being determined on a case-by-case basis. This gives us some guidelines for what it would take for a film to be an improvised work: some significant part(s) of the film's creation must be carried out in an improvised way, with the results of these improvised parts of the creative process counting as significant for the film's character as an artwork and contributing to its artistic value. Just what these parts of the creative process might be, and how they might be improvised, will be the focus of the next section.

4. *Possibilities for cinematic improvisation*

Ryle's remark, quoted above, about there being no 'internal tape' of one's action or utterance when these are improvised (Ryle 1976: 74) hints at what may be one reason for skepticism about the idea of a film itself being an improvised work—in effect, a finished film *is* such a tape, whether literally, in the case of a film strip imprinted with the still frames that comprise each shot, arranged in a fixed order, or figuratively, in the case of a digital file containing virtual 'imprints' of the film's images in the form of bitmaps. The film print (or file) already contains what the audience will see before they see it, with each proper screening of that print repeating the same predetermined images (and sounds) in the same predetermined, linear sequence.¹⁷ In this respect, films are analogous to Ryle's "trams" (Ryle 1976: 69). However, as the point above about how 'products' can be improvised artworks shows, even a fixed sequence of images like this can be an improvised artwork on the above definition, provided the creative process of which the film is the result involved significant improvisation on the part of the film's maker(s).

4.1 *Some ways in which a film's creation can be improvised*

Given the near-universal focus on acting in the existing discussions of improvisation in cinema, not much needs to be added here. It is worth noting how improvised acting overlaps with writing, insofar as actors who improvise what their characters do and say are, in effect, the authors of their performances, or at least parts thereof, being responsible for the same things—dialogue, actions, reactions, the dramatic beats and progression of a scene, etc.—for which screenwriters are responsible in scripted filmmaking. Other ways in which the writing (or rather, the 'plotting') of a film can be improvised extend beyond dialogue and actions. If improvised scenes are shot in chronological order without a full script, what will happen in any one scene need not be determined

¹⁷ An *improper* screening would be one in which the sequence of images and sounds determined by the filmmaker is not presented; e.g. if reels are projected out of order, if a DVD skips over a significant number of scenes, etc.

in advance but can follow from what the actors have done up to that point. In this case, the actors might not only be the authors of their characters' actions and words, but can contribute to shaping the narrative as a whole. Films where both the narrative and the words and actions of the characters are improvised are rare, given the requirements of time, money, equipment, and the coordination of multiple schedules, along with the uncertainty of whether anything good will result from the process. Something between such a fully improvised narrative and a traditionally pre-scripted one could involve someone—likely the director—who has a general idea of the narrative trajectory of the film, including the ending, with the actors improvising each scene and with the scenario being open to revision in response to the improvisations within each scene as it was filmed.¹⁸

Cinematography—encompassing the framing and composition, movement, adjustments to the lens and focus (e.g. zooming, racking focus from foreground to background or vice versa, etc.)—also offers the potential for improvisation by the camera operator, who can adjust these elements 'on the fly' in response to whatever is occurring in front of and around the camera. Improvising actors will almost certainly require the camera operator to improvise along with them, adjusting framing and focus and moving in response to their movements,¹⁹ but a camera operator can also improvise these elements independently of the actors, whether or not the actors are themselves improvising—e.g. deciding to pan away from the actors at a certain point or not to follow them with the camera and allow them to leave the frame, or spontaneously deciding to zoom in or out or change position, etc.

Just as the camera operator following and responding to actors can be considered improvised shooting when the movements are not blocked out in advance, the sound recordist/boom operator will also need to improvise in order to follow the actors with the microphone, both in traditional shooting and when actors are improvising, since the microphone will need to be redirected, with minimal time delay, to pick up the voice of each actor as he or she speaks. There does not, however, seem to be the same *artistic* potential here as there does for improvising with the camera, since the sound recordist will be limited to following the actors without being as free to improvise the direction of the microphone.²⁰ Similarly, while the choice to have actors improvise a

¹⁸ This is how Berkeley (2011) describes the process through which he made *How to Change the World* (2008). Garrity's *Zooey and Adam* (2009) and *Blood Pressure* (2012) were also made by taking a similar approach.

¹⁹ See Carney (1999: 72), on the camera operator's need to improvise during the filming of *Shadows* (1959).

²⁰ This assumes that no artistically interesting effect can be created by the sound recordist spontaneously deciding *not* to record some part of a scene, whereas one might be had from not following them with the camera. This difference comes down, I think, to the differences between visual and auditory experience, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this further.

scene will affect how the scene will be lit, there doesn't seem to be room for the lighting itself to be improvised in any sense; rather, there will be *less* room for expressiveness on the part of the lighting crew, since the way to ensure that actors' performances, which can range across the space of the scene in unpredictable ways, will be properly exposed is to light the whole space as evenly—and hence, flatly—as possible.²¹

A director might seem limited in his or her ability to improvise during the shooting of a film since, whereas the camera operator and sound recordist are performing their roles simultaneously with the actors' performances to which they can respond in the moment, a director's response to what the actors or crew do during a take typically comes after the take is finished, through feedback and direction regarding what they should do differently in the *next* take. However, there are ways for a director and the actors, or the crewmembers, to watch, listen, and respond to one another in the moment as a take is being filmed. Furthermore, a director can give verbal feedback or cues while a take is being filmed so long as they edit out their voice afterwards, limiting them to talking only in moments where none of the actors is speaking.²²

Despite the temporal gaps involved in the director giving direction between the takes, there is room for a director to carry out her role with spontaneity, openness and responsiveness—especially, but not only, when the actors and crew are themselves improvising their roles. If a director goes into the staging and shooting of a given scene without a pre-established plan for exactly how it will unfold—e.g. working without fixed storyboards or shot lists—she can discover the way she thinks the scene should be shot by having the actors and crew do it various ways before settling on one that she thinks works. This way, aspects of both the 'form' and the 'content' of a scene can emerge during filming rather than being decided upon beforehand. If the director's primary role is to have a sense of how each element will fit together to form the whole film and to make sure that what is done at various points in the process will result in a coherent whole (cf. Wexman 1980: 34), the directing can be considered improvisatory when the director's idea of the whole to which the parts will add up is open and evolves in response to what occurs during shooting.

Although Wexman focuses on acting, she observes that a director or an editor "can maximize the impact of an improvised scene by subjecting it to imaginative editing" (Wexman 1980: 32), in effect creating a new 'performance' by assembling footage taken at different moments, which can alter the meaning or effect of what an actor said or did. While this might be done based on a prior plan, with the editor thinking that a certain effect would fit well at that point in the scene and

²¹ See Carney (1999: 237–38), on Cassavetes' way of lighting scenes to give actors maximal range of movement.

²² David Lynch can be seen directing Laura Dern in this way in the behind-the-scenes footage on the DVD of *Inland Empire* (2006).

then looking through the footage that was filmed in order to find pieces that could be assembled to create this effect, it might equally be done spontaneously, with the editor assembling filmed footage ‘intuitively’ such that a new, unforeseen meaning or effect emerges from the combination. There seems no reason not to call this way of working ‘improvisational editing’.²³ There is a precedent for this in Cassavetes’ remark that, after shooting multiple takes of each scene, with each take being done in a different way, the editing room was the real place of *his* improvisation, where he “was able to reshape the film ... making wholesale changes in every aspect of it in light of what the film itself revealed to him as he worked on it” (Carney 1999: 178).²⁴ If the director’s idea of the whole that each part will come together to form can remain open to revision and evolve during shooting, it could also continue to be open and evolve after the film has been shot but before editing is complete.

If these are some ways in which elements of the filmmaking process might be improvised, with the ‘execution’ of the film as a whole consisting of the execution of these parts of the process, then, combined with the above discussion of improvised artworks, it follows that for a film to count as *an improvised work*, rather than a work that involves improvisation, some number of these elements will need to have been improvised to a significant degree, and in a way that makes an important difference to the artistic character and value of the film as a whole. The extent to which a film is improvised will admit of degrees, allowing it to fall on a spectrum running from tightly pre-scripted and controlled productions on one end to entirely spontaneous productions on the other. For example, Ingmar Bergman’s *Shame* (1968), which contains one scene in which the lead actors improvise their conversation,²⁵ would be higher on the spectrum than a film in which everything, including framing, camera movement and how shots will be combined in editing, is worked out in advance—e.g. through storyboarding—and executed to conform to these plans. A pre-scripted film in which actors had freedom with *how* they spoke their lines and moved on set, but where *what* they said and did was scripted, would fall somewhere in between.

A film like *The Interior* (Trevor Juras, 2015) would be above *Shame* on the spectrum, since two-thirds of the scenes were filmed based on a loose outline, with the particulars of what the lead actor did and said and the blocking of the movements and composition of the image being worked out in the moment.²⁶ However, it would be below a film like *Best in Show* (Christopher Guest, 2000), since the specifics of what

²³ The ‘jump cuts’ in Godard’s *À bout de souffle/Breathless* were the result of an off-the-cuff suggestion made by Truffaut during the film’s editing as a way of picking up the pace of a scene that dragged. If the idea occurred to Truffaut in the moment, there would seem to be no reason not to count this as an improvised editing choice.

²⁴ See also Carney (1999: 242–43) for other, similar remarks from Cassavetes.

²⁵ Liv Ullmann discusses the improvised nature of this scene on the DVD features for the MGM release of the film.

²⁶ Personal correspondence with the filmmaker.

the actor acts in the former film don't contribute as significantly to the film's overall character as do the actors' improvisations in the latter. And *Best in Show* would fall below *Punishment Park* (Peter Watkins, 1971), a film in which non-professional actors engage in real political argument on camera, role-playing exaggerated versions of their own political stances, and in which the camera operator, sound recordist, and director themselves improvised the recording and, in places, their interaction with the on-camera actors (see Rapfogel, 2007). Near the top of the spectrum would come a film like *Zoey and Adam* (Sean Garrity, 2009), which was made working from a three page idea of the characters and the basic dramatic situation, with nearly every element of the filmmaking process being improvised and with the overall narrative, its structure, and the characters' dramatic development evolving during the production process.²⁷ Given what I have argued above, films closer to the top end of the spectrum, like *Punishment Park* and *Zoey and Adam*, should be counted as improvised films, while those near the other end, like *Shame* and *The Interior*, will count only as films that involve improvisation, being more like concertos with cadenzas than the *Köln Concert*.²⁸

4.2 *The positive artistic potential of improvised filmmaking*

From interviews and statements about their own work, many filmmakers who use improvisation do so to gain a sense of realism, i.e. to have the actors' performances or other aspects of the film such as the camerawork feel 'fresh', 'raw', or 'natural'. For instance, when Leo Berkeley (2011), an independent filmmaker and media professor in Australia, discusses the use of improvisation in his film *How to Change the World* (2008), he notes that he was motivated by seeing the performances in films by Altman and Rivette, being "drawn to the sense of uncertainty and unpredictability captured in these films, where moments of performance were intensely 'watchable' in ways that seemed independent of the needs of the plot. They seemed to more successfully reflect the complexity in the interaction between two people when they relate, with the uncertainties, miscommunications, hesitations, contradictions and confusions that can be apparent on many levels, in what is spoken and what is unspoken." As he explains, he chose to have his actors improvise from an outline, rather than scripting dialogue or interactions in

²⁷ Personal correspondence with the filmmaker. The website for the film, www.zoeyandadam.com, also contains information on the process by which this film was made.

²⁸ Films that fall in the middle of the spectrum, like *Best in Show*, may be ambiguous. Relative to films lower on the spectrum, they could be considered improvised, but relative to films higher up, they could be considered only to involve improvisation (though to a high degree). My instinct would be to say that, as a film overall, *Best in Show* is not itself an improvised work if the acting/dialogue were the only elements that were improvised, but that it *may be* if other elements, e.g. the editing or the development of the narrative, were also improvised.

advance, as a way to “[capture] these dimensions of human interaction” (Berkeley 2011: 3).²⁹

While talk of ‘freshness’ or ‘rawness’ can be simplistic if referring to just an appearance of naturalism in the acting, or naive if it is thought that improvisation is sufficient, or even necessary, for achieving this appearance,³⁰ it can sometimes refer to a more substantial—and more artistically interesting—position that goes beyond the actors’ performances *looking like* ‘real life’ human behaviour and their dialogue *sounding like* ‘real’ conversation. The interest here has to do with presenting human behaviour in a way that is *ontologically* closer to, or even identical with, ‘real’ behaviour; in contrast, acting that achieves a naturalistic *appearance* when the actor is carrying out what was already conceived and worked out in the script is, in effect, a simulation of behaviour.³¹ Thinking about an action and doing it are different processes, and anything that can be conceived of in advance by a writer for a fictional character to do involves the former, not the latter. Rather than presenting viewers with a pre-interpreted action whose meaning and place in the story are worked out in advance, improvisation presents viewers with something that was done as it was conceived, and before it is interpreted or understood. In this respect, it is ontologically on par with ordinary behaviour, which is rarely planned in advance and is often understood and interpreted, by those observing it and by the agent himself, only after it has been performed.

One artistically interesting example of a moment achievable only through improvisation, in which an actor’s performance and a character’s action in the story coincide, is found towards the end of Garrity’s *Zoey and Adam*. In the scene, the character (Zoey) comes home to find her son gone with her ex-husband (Adam) and is told that Adam had earlier been talking to the son about a location that featured prominently earlier in the film. What the improvised process of the film’s production allows that a scripted and rehearsed film would not is for the audience to witness the actor playing Zoey figure out, in real time, what has happened to her character’s child by actually making the connection herself between this message and her memory of the mention of the location in a scene filmed some time earlier.³² The inference the

²⁹ For another representative example, see Dowell (2008) on the motivation behind the child actors in the sitcom *Outnumbered* being encouraged to improvise, forcing the actors playing the parents to improvise *their* reactions.

³⁰ Improvised acting is not necessarily naturalistic acting; witness the highly stylized improvised performances in *Céline et Julie vont en bateau/Celine and Julie Go Boating* (Jacques Rivette, 1974).

³¹ Cf. Ryle (1976: 70): “The remark I am engaged in making now is not, except sometimes, the repetition of anything I have heard or said before. It is, though usually a perfectly unsurprising remark, a fresh remark composed *ad hoc*, namely to fit a fresh conversational juncture.”

³² It is important that it was the first take of actress playing this moment in the scene that was used. As director Sean Garrity has said in personal correspondence, he will often choose to use a take in which an actor is reacting for the first time

actress makes and the realization it leads to are equivalent to what the character in the story does in this moment, and although we can't see a person's thought process, we *do* see her body language and outward reactions as her cognitive and emotional processes occur, where much of her embodied response occurs unconsciously. Thus, the audience encounters a fictional event of a character going through a thought process, inferring something, and reacting emotionally by encountering an actual person actually doing these things.³³

When it comes to interactions between multiple characters, improvised scenes will be realistic in other ways. For one thing, actual human interaction involve a meeting, and at times a clash, of genuinely different perspectives, understandings, interpretations, beliefs, etc., each coming from a different person. However, a single writer scripting the actions of a large number of characters is limited to presenting his or her own version of these perspectives, as imagined from his or her perspective, drawing from one set of personal experiences and understandings rather than having a different set—i.e. each actor's—be the basis of each character's actions and utterances.³⁴ For another thing, when each actor improvises her or his part without knowing what the other actors are thinking or what they will do, how they will respond, etc., the actors are put into the same position people are in when interacting with others in real life—where this is the position of the characters they're

to a significant story event previously unknown to them, even if there are minor technical imperfections in the shot and even if the actor's observable reaction is not particularly overt, in order to have the film allow the viewer to see the actor's experience in the moment and the character's experience in the world of the fiction coinciding. As he says, even if there is no discernable difference between such a take and a scripted performance, it nevertheless makes a difference to *what it is* that the audience is encountering—or, in philosophical terms, to the ontological status of the performance seen through the filmic recording.

³³ Something similar may occur in Mike Leigh's *Vera Drake* (2004), in a scene in which the lead character's family is surprised by a revelation about this character, with the actors (other than the lead playing Vera) first learning this information as their characters do, though I am uncertain whether the surprise occurred for the *actors* during the filming of the take that we see in the finished film or whether it occurred earlier, e.g. during the filming of a previous take, or in rehearsal.

³⁴ Watkins' *Punishment Park*, and even moreso his film *La Commune: Paris 1871* (2000), are good illustrations of this. In the first, non-professional actors of different backgrounds and political persuasions—young radicals, middle-aged, middle-class conservatives, and those with an actual military or police background—are allowed, as their characters, to express their own viewpoints and responses to what the other cast members say, which allows for the expression of a genuinely wider set of perspectives than if a single author, e.g. Watkins, had come up with what each character would say in defence of their 'side'. In the second film, a quasi-documentary re-enactment of the titular Paris commune, the documentary research was largely conducted by the cast members (also non-professionals) who then were able express their own thoughts on what they had researched and how they thought the historical situation and conditions related to their contemporary lives, as well as role-playing members of the commune engaged in what would have been their historical counterparts' daily tasks.

playing within the fictional world. On the other hand, when there is a script that lets each actor know, in advance, what the other characters will say or do, this element of real human interaction is no longer part of the process the actors are actually going through in acting out the scene, and so must be ‘faked’.³⁵ Having the story or the content of scenes emerge through a collaborative process of rehearsal, in the way Mike Leigh’s films (e.g. *Secrets and Lies* [1996], *Vera Drake* [2004]) do,³⁶ helps overcome the first limitation, but insofar as what exactly is performed in front of the camera has to been worked out in advance, as in the case of Leigh’s films, the second limitation can still apply.

This approach to presenting characters’ behaviour makes it easier to avoid the essentializing tendencies and reductive ‘psychologizing’ of most screenwriting manuals, where writers are encouraged to work out what a character says and does based on an inevitably narrow conception of the character’s defining psychological traits and dispositions, including his or her primary motivation and goal(s) in the narrative. While this approach predetermines and locks down the meaning of events in a film’s story, improvisation in the processes of ‘constructing’ the scenes, narrative, and characters allows this meaning to emerge from, and in response to, the particular events, actions, and interactions in which they are situated, where these constitute the context in which they ‘mean’ anything at a pragmatic level.³⁷

While these last paragraphs have discussed improvised acting, and the improvisation in the ‘writing’ of a film that this overlaps with, their point also applies to improvisation in the other elements of filmmaking discussed in §4.1. What is at issue is, in effect, the difference between what Ray Carney calls a “discovery model” vs. a “blueprint model” of artistic creation (Carney 1994: 187–88).³⁸ Whereas the latter model involves presenting pre-interpreted experiences that stay within an artist’s existing ‘horizon’ of understanding, the latter involves forming new understandings and interpretations by undergoing the experi-

³⁵ Cf. Ryle (1976: 74), and the line about the “internal tape” quoted above. To run with the metaphor, a pre-written script is just such a ‘tape’, with acting from a script facing the problem of working out how to behave as if one hasn’t seen this tape in advance of doing it when, in fact, one has.

³⁶ It is Leigh’s use of improvisation in rehearsal, and not during the actual filming (at which point a script is used), that has garnered him a reputation for improvisational filmmaking (see Movshovitz [2000]). See also Carney (1994: 26), on the reputation of Cassavetes’ first film, *Shadows* (1959), for having been entirely improvised. In fact, it was an earlier version of the film, developed from improvisations by the actors in a way that sounds similar to Leigh’s approach and shot in 1957, that had more of a claim to this status, but the second version of the film that was shot in 1959, which is the version commonly known and currently available, was mostly made from a script Cassavetes wrote based on the first, improvised version after being dissatisfied with the first.

³⁷ Cf. Wittgenstein’s (1953) arguments against ostensive definition and for an alternative ‘meaning-as-use’ account of language.

³⁸ Cf. Collingwood (1938) on the art/craft distinction.

ences involved in making the artwork, allowing for a responsiveness to this flow of experiences *from within*, rather than from an intellectual position 'above' it. As Carney writes, "Cassavetes' style shows us what it looks and feels like to be *in* an experience, puzzling over it, emotionally involved in it, intellectually responding to it (and adjusting one's responses to it) as it happens" (Carney 1994: 189). Beyond the acting, improvisation in the camerawork or editing can contribute to the production of a film being a discovery by those making it, rather than the executing of a blueprint. Instead of replicating the framing and movements worked out in a storyboard in order to realize a predetermined understanding or effect, an improvising camera operator, by searching within the visual space of a scene as it is played out and interpreting it through the details selected—and the ways chosen to pick them out, in terms of the framing, the movement of the camera and lens, etc.—can play a part in creating the understanding of the action that the film will present to viewers. And an editor searching through footage that has been shot and closely attending to each take (both perceptually and empathetically), making intuitive connections between them instead of working from a shot list or a 'paper edit',³⁹ is doing something similar.

While improvisation can result in a naturalistic look, it can also be used for anti-naturalistic purposes, e.g. to disrupt what Froger refers to as 'the effect of the real'. The aim of some filmmakers who use improvisation to get away from the 'blueprint' model of creation can be to work against expectations and disrupt familiar patterns—'blueprints' for experience—in the narrative, in its cinematic presentation, and in the audience's cognitive and emotional reception of the film. As Carney explains, "Cassavetes forces [viewers] to grapple with unanalyzed and unexplained expressive surfaces. The viewer is put in the position of not knowing quite who the characters are, why they are behaving in the way they are, or exactly how to interpret their specific expressions. [...] The consequence is to force the viewer to abandon the attempt to trace expressive behaviour back to a reductive set of 'essential' intentions, feelings, and attitudes (that is, if it doesn't send him scurrying out of the theatre in bewilderment)" (Carney 1994: 10).⁴⁰ Leigh makes a similar point in an interview, saying that "[w]hatever film you watch, assuming you've seen a film before, you immediately go into one program or another, or plug into an expectation system, [but if] the film is any good, these expectations are constantly confounded" (Movshovitz 2000: 65–66).⁴¹ Regardless of whether improvisation, and the unconventional experiences it can give viewers, will result in a film's popular-

³⁹ A 'paper edit' is a script made for the editor based on footage that has already been shot, indicating an order in which the shots should be assembled.

⁴⁰ This suggests, contra Froger and Wexman, that the 'confusion' or 'alienation' that may be felt in response to a film that offers an unconventional viewing experience is a failure of the viewer, not of the film.

⁴¹ Note that Leigh's claim "if the film is any good..." implies a reversal of the criteria of artistic value that Froger and Wexman seem to assume.

ity or commercial success, I contend that they are *artistically* interesting and can be valuable, potentially adding positively to a film's artistic properties in a way similar to Lewis' notion of "aesthetic thickening" mentioned above.

5. *Conclusion: Improvisation and ethical implications for creation and reception*

In the previous section I have argued that, on the account presented in §3 of what it is for an artwork to be an improvised work, there are various ways for a film not only to involve improvisation in its creation, but to be itself an improvised work, and that improvisation can contribute positively to a film's artistic value. Of course, improvising during the making of a film is not guaranteed to contribute positively in this way; as with any technique or approach in artistic creation, and in any artform, it can be done well or poorly. I hope to have shown, partly through the cinematic examples I have discussed, that it has the potential to be artistically interesting, that a number of films that employ it are artistically successful because of the ways in which their making was improvised by those who made them, and that this aspect of such films is worth attending to more than it has been by film scholars and philosophers of art.

As well as its artistic potential, improvisatory approaches to filmmaking could be said to have potentially positive social or ethical dimensions.⁴² A typically hierarchical model of production with an industrial division of labour can be made more collaborative, with each member of the cast or crew having more substantial input into the creation and shaping of a film than they would if carrying out a pre-assigned role, since being asked to improvise calls on one to engage all one's skills and capacities for attention and judgment in the performance of one's role, and can generate a sense of shared responsibility for a communal project. Moreover, the ways of relating to others involved in improvisation—close attention, openness, listening, empathy, imagination, thoughtfulness, etc.—mirror those involved in *ethical* relations, where improvising can involve exercising and strengthening these capacities and dispositions. Following Hannah Arendt (1971), thinking beyond the 'blueprints' formed by one's existing beliefs and interpretations, i.e. being able to evaluate and judge the appropriateness of an action to a situation in ways that go beyond any codifiable set of ethical rules or fixed principles, is arguably essential for living ethically.

In addition to potentially exercising and strengthening socially and ethically positive dispositions in those making the film, artworks that are created through a 'discovery' rather than a 'blueprint' approach

⁴² As with the artistic benefits of improvisation, these social or ethical benefits are only potentially realizable; not all productions of films that involve improvisation will necessarily realize them, and they can be realized in non-improvised productions. I am discussing tendencies and potential here, not necessary and sufficient conditions.

have a similar potential for audiences. If, as Arendt insists, thinking and acting from a fixed mental schema or blueprint can lead to ethical failings, works that *don't* give their audiences neatly packaged understandings and perspectives that fit into familiar categories, but instead require audiences to grapple with experiences, feelings, perspectives, ideas, etc. on their own terms and in their particularity, can give the viewers practice in what Arendt calls 'real thinking', along with the ethical skills and dispositions mentioned above. Contra Froger and Wexman, I contend that it shows more respect for audiences *not* to pander to them by organizing and presenting events and experiences in familiar, conventional ways, since this assumes they will only be able to process and understand the familiar and the conventional—and moreover, denies them an opportunity from which they could learn. Even if many viewers may likely resist such an opportunity, actively wanting the familiar and conventional, I would argue that it is more ethical to resist this resistance than give in to it for commercial success.⁴³

I would also argue that there is a further ethical dimension, and perhaps even a cognitive benefit, to audiences being open to approaching a work on *its* terms or trying to get on *its* wavelength, as opposed to expecting it to cater to *their* expectations and conform to *their* existing categories and modes of understanding. This comes down to an attitude of engagement with, rather than the consumption of, art. Obviously, a work need not be improvised in order for a viewer to approach it in this way, but the unpredictability and transcending of familiar conventions that improvisation often involves requires viewers also to transcend their expectations and familiar categories. By adapting their cognitive and emotional engagement to a film that, through its use of improvisation, makes available new forms of understanding, new ways of perceiving, or new patterns of thinking and feeling, viewers can make those ways of understanding, perceiving, thinking and feeling their own, and so can gain—or strengthen—new ways of experiencing and engaging with not only films or artworks, but life in general.⁴⁴

⁴³ An anecdote recounted in Carney (1994), concerns a conversation with Cassavetes in which the filmmaker, "imitating an imaginary viewer watching one of his films ... slouched down in his chair and flailed his arms wildly in front of his face, as if shielding his eyes from the fury of an atomic blast, while chortling: 'A new experience? Oh, no! Save me! Anything but that!'" (Carney 1994, 2).

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