Continuity Editing in Documentary Film

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Keywords: Documentary, Editing, Continuity.

Abstract: This study focuses on continuity in documentary film editing. As a part of film's pipeline production, editing takes an important role in terms of delivering the story, especially for documentary which comprises many unpredictable events during the production. This study uses one of the qualitative research methodologies namely practice- based research. That methodology will be followed by case study method in order to provide actual case study from the industry. Moreover, Whiteley and Gurrumul that won the best editing in 2017 and 2018 are used as case study in this research. Insight and techniques that are implemented in those films are taken and then it is applied to the project. Three continuity techniques; 180º, over the shoulder, and action match are implemented in the film editing, and it comes up with a reflective process in order to know what type of continuity that can run well and what is not. As the result, the documentary film runs into two minutes long while it is not as original plan since the project has not adequate material to implement the aforementioned continuity techniques.

1 INTRODUCTION

For the creative project, "Indri" is edited in two minutes. It is a short biographical documentary about Siti Nurlaila Indiriani, who is a master's student of Sustainable Energy Engineering at RMIT University. According to the experience, working in documentary film is a big challenge. The filmmaker confronted a real situation where they did not have adequate material, such as extra footage, as a supporting element to enable them to deliver the story clearly to the viewer. When they struggled to establish the story's flow, they ruined the continuity aspect of the edit. In particular, several parts of the story ran too fast or they could notice that the transition between shots was too apparent.

The main objective of continuity in editing is to preserve the audience's attention and avoid audience from being confused in the middle of the story. The continuity itself should be applied smoothly in order to prevent the viewer from feeling distracted by transition between shots and to give time to the viewer to catch the story flow moment by moment. Consequently, in the production process, the filmmaker usually took a number of camera placements in order to support them in creating continuity during the editing process, such as 180º

rule, over the shoulder, and action match. These existing shots will be used to explore continuity editing techniques. Testing will be conducted on the editing process to learn whether those camera placements work to keep continuity or not.

According to Bricca (2017), there are no fixed rules about editing documentaries. Moreover, the research will focus on continuity techniques in documentary editing. The editing in documentaries has shown how challenging it is for the editor when they have a large amount of material and are required to choose the right shots to be used. The shots then have to make it into an interactive visual while maintaining both visual and narrative continuity.

To support this research, the practice-based research is implemented as the methodology. Those methodology is chosen since it is suitable for the creative production. Batty and Kerrigan (2018) state that screen production associated with creative practice research enquiries can be represented in several ways; practice-led-research, practice-as-research, practice-based-re- search, and research-led practice. Furthermore, there is case study method that works in line with the practice-based research. The case study method will generate the reflection in the of the result in order to measure which part of

continuity methods that will work well and what is not.

2 CONTINUITY EDITING

Continuity editing explores editing methods which connects to a narrative system and enables the story to be illustrated with less disruption and disorientation to the audience (Orpen, 2003). Furthermore, a study conducted by Kydd (2011) tells that continuity editing develops a specific cinematic space in which the spectator is bound into a certain focus that connects with the action of the scene. The main aim of continuity style is to transmit narrative information smoothly and clearly over a series of shots (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2013). In addition, based on argument from Schaefer (1997), 'when continuity techniques are done well, the scene's edit appears to be nearly invisible'.

Continuity in editing can be employed across numerous elements in a film, such as story flow, camera placement or angle, and cutting. Phillips (2009) gives an illustration of camera angle eye line matches from the scene of Life is Beautiful (1998) when the man on his bi- cycle looks off-screen to the left; the next shot shows what he is looking at. Over the shoulder shots are usually employed for conversation or dialogue scenes to display the reaction and emotion of each actor. Furthermore, continuity editing can also be reached by cutting the action. For instance, a shot shows the end of the subject's movement and the next shot starts with a different angle or distance.

2.1 180º Rule

When working with 180º rule, continuity editing is required to deal with the perception of spatial and temporal (Magliano & Zacks, 2011). According to Bordwell et al. (2013), to produce continuity style for the scene's space, the filmmaker can use the axis of action, the center line or 180º rule.

It is essential to keep in mind during the production that all shots must be taken from the same side of "axis of action" or the imaginary line created by the camera persons in their mind. If the camera crosses the axis of action, it establishes the space context and will create confusion for the viewer's understanding of the film's visual. Firstly, the background will change, which may confuse audiences, and after seeing the right side of the characters, the audience is exhibited the left side which is another space that shifts the context of axis

of action. Secondly, the cutting between two shots that go across the axis of action will create the appearance of characters speaking with themselves, as they replace each other's spaces rather than each other (Kydd, 2011). As an illustration, the first shot is camera 3, then the camera position goes to X position; when it turns into editing, the continuity of 180º rule will not work, and it appears that the characters are talking to themselves.

In terms of creating varieties of aesthetic framing, the editor can employ one of the applicable angles of shot from 180º system, such as over the shoulder (OTS). This is usually used to reveal the conversation between two persons and positioned either in place of the listening character or just behind their shoulder (camera 2 and 3 – see Figure 1). As stated by Smith (2006), over the shoulder displays both characters on screen at the same time; the shoulder and back of the listener's head is shown on one side of the screen while the speaker's face can be seen on the other side of the screen.
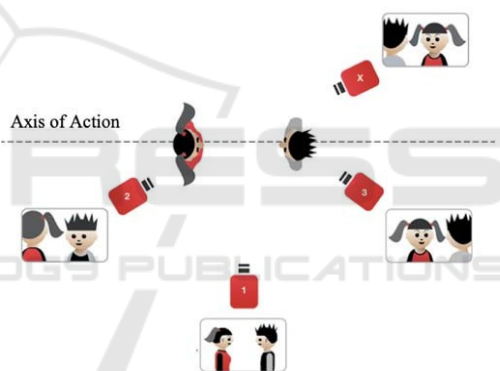

Figure 1: 180º rule of camera spot, all shots must be taken from camera 1, 2,3. A cut cross from camera X will create a "discontinuity".

2.2 Match Action

One of the important components in generating smooth continuity is to match action between two construction shots. Nevertheless, the noticeable problem to matching action is 'to keep the action and movement shown in consecutive shots accurately continuous' (Reisz & Millar, 1997). According to (Kydd, 2011), match action is 'part of the continuity system that provides links between the shots, using movements that are the same from one position to another'. In addition, match cut is based on 'visual continuity, significance as well as similarity in angle or direction' (Dancyger, 2018).

As an example, when filming an actor, the camera person can take several shots of the actor from many

positions; it usually has several takes in the same shot and scene, but it is important to note that the actor's movements must be made within the parameters of the camera's position. The editor then cuts the scene by finding the point where the action between shots is most closely matched. Nevertheless, the exact part to cut is based on the editor's sense of movement and character (Katz, 1991).
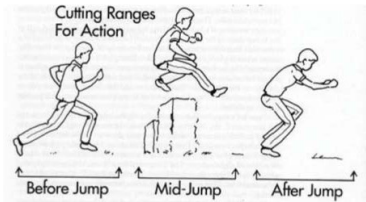

Figure 2: Match action that could be cut between "before jump" and "mid- jump".

Match action is also related to maintaining the screen direction in terms of having narrative continuity. It is necessary to maintain the screen direction to avoid audience confusion and to make the characters distinct. The pattern of right-left or left-right is the most main concern for keeping screen direction. Burch (1973) suggests that if someone or something in the screen on the left side enters the new frame, it must be showing the space that closes from the right; if this condition is not accomplished, there has been a modification in the direction of a moving person or objects. This explanation is also meet the implementation of match exit/entering cut. When someone enters a room, the first shot will show the character on the right side of screen; then for the next shot when the character has already entered the room, the shot will show the character on the left side of the screen
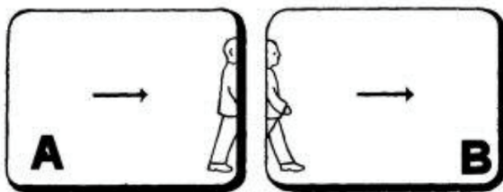

Figure 3: Match action exit/entrance.

3 METHODOLOGY

Candy and Ernest (2018) argue that new media arts as one of the creative artefacts highlighting the creative process and the works that are made; practice and research operate together to construct new knowledge that can be distributed and analysed. Based on this argument, the research will be practice- based. To support the methodology, the reflection will be used

as the method to approach the case study. According to (Starman, 2013), case study becomes the first type of research that is utilized in qualitative methodology. In addition, the reflection method will become part of the learning process after analysing the case study, implementing this into the creative practice, and finally reflecting upon the creative practice. As such as, the reflective practice is 'intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives' (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).

First and foremost, to have adequate material for research, the study will be working on analysing two documentary case studies from the Australian Award of Cinema and Television Arts Awards (AACTA). Whiteley won Best Editing in a Documentary in 2017 and Gurrumul was nominee for Best Editing in a Documentary in 2018. We will look at the first three minutes of each documentary film and take note of how they approach the editing in general, as well as focus on how they maintain the continuity throughout the editing process. The case study analysis will inform and improve the creative work. According to Rowley (2002), case study is widely used since it suggests various ways of gaining insight that might not have been reached with other approaches; case study is also applied for evolving more structured tools that are important in surveys and experiments. In the end, after exploration in continuity editing, the research will reflect on which things work well and which do not during the post- production process. The reflection on the case study is part of the learning process in the creative project. Ghauri (2004) says that 'a case study is both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning'.

4 CASE STUDY

The analysis will be concerned on the first three minutes of Whiteley and Gurrumul. We picked up the beginning because it usually determines the audience's interest to watch the whole film.

In addition, during the analysis process, the reflection method will be used as an approach to the learning process in which several points of analysis will be implemented into the creative practice. The reflection method is also used as a process of problem-solving any issues that might occur in executing the own creative work.

4.1 Whiteley

Whiteley is a documentary film about Australia's most iconic artist, Brett Whiteley, with duration of

one hour and 35 minutes. This documentary uses a notion of 'in his own words' and visualises Whiteley's story by using his notebooks, personal letters, photographs, and other materials that support his concept (IMDb, 2019).

Figure 4: The opening visual of Whiteley documentary film.

In the first scene, the documentary shows montage sequences of black and white, and colourful images to introduce Whiteley, explaining when and where he was born. As mentioned by Frierson (2018), 'montage in the broad sense describes a series of short shots that compress time, space, or narrative information, but it actually has several diverse meanings. Montage sequences can be used as one of the supplementary elements to support the visual aesthetic. Leibowich (2007) supports the concept that montage can be used as a device for establishing spatial and temporal relationships within a movie.

As the montage sequence commences, there are a small number of quick cuts, swift moves between medium shots and close-up shots, and shifts in screen direction. However, as the sequences begin, there is no action shown of the character. It is a beautiful opening of this documentary film, but as there is a rapid shift from one shot to others, the cutting across the screen with various directions does not allow for the viewer to enjoy the visual moment of every painting. In the classical Hollywood style, montage describes a series of shots in which these shots do not maintain the continuity concept, spatial and temporal continuity, but the shots link together on every image over time or across space (Orpen, 2003). This also occurs in this documentary film; the montage sequences refer to the creation of meaning within the film and are used as a tool for introducing the character by providing a series of beautifully crafted pieces by Whiteley.

Moreover, the process by which the editor picked the beautiful series of shots can be appreciated since

this component is really attractive for the audience. With the combination of Whiteley's self-portrait and his amazing art pieces, this brings the audience to feel more engaged in understanding his life story. The black and white concept showing his portrait distinguishes the expressions and activities of Whiteley with his creative work.

Figure 5: Black and white self-potrait of Whiteley.

The voiceover in this scene is a narration from an actor that provides an intimate effect that brings the audience closer to knowing more about the existence of Whiteley. Referring to Dancyger (2018), the narration can aid the visual or directly give understanding into the meaning; narration also can be an important audio element in the documentary. Narration assists in producing clear communication to the viewer. Furthermore, the montage concept of this documentary used in the beginning leaves no space to visually show the dialogue part. As stated by Bordwell, et al. (2013), montage sequences usually lack dialogue, and the sequences usually come with music as the back sound.

4.2 Gurrumul

This is a documentary film of one hour and 36 minutes telling the story of Indigenous artist, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu. Born blind, his community inspired him to write songs. 'Gurrumul is a portrait of an artist on the brink of global reverence, and the struggles he and those closest to him faced in balancing that which mattered most to him and keeping the show on the road' (IMDb, 2019). This documentary film won two awards and was nominated in five categories, including Best Editing in a Documentary.

The opening of this film is beautiful; it reflects the lived experience of Gurrumul, showing a black screen with the voiceover of an ABC reporter interviewing

Gurrumul. It represents what Gurrumul's world is like. The only thing he sees is dark and black; he can hear anything, but he does not know how his surroundings look. It is an amazing way to introduce the character's condition and his shy personality. The next scene comes up with a medium shot portrait of Gurrumul (see Figure 6), demonstrating the physical appearance of his character.

Figure 6: Medium close-up of character potrait.

Figure 7 shows the camera position within a 180º, arch in which this 30º position rule means the camera has to move at least 30º between two shots. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that there cannot be two shots that are too close to each other. If this happens, it will confuse the viewer and reveal an awareness of the cutting. When the camera does not have adequate space between shots, a jump cut will exist, and it is considered to break the rules of continuity editing (Kydd, 2011).

Figure 7: 30º rule.

Figure 8 shows one of the scenes in Gurrumul that implements the 180º rule camera placement system. It is evident that the camera position is still in the axis of action area that defines the spatial correlation between three characters. The camera position moves on one side of the line and moves to a different position, but still does not cross the imaginary line. Shot D in Figure 8 uses the over the shoulder shot, which is usually used to show the dialogue action. The camera is positioned on the back and shoulder of the reporter while the other character's B face can be clearly seen on the other side of the screen. Although there is an excess of head space in that shot, it creates

a space for the shoulder, but according to Magliano and Zacks (2011), as long as the chosen shoulder area is still within a 180º arc, the character will remain on the correct side of the screen. The correct side of the screen also preserves the direction of the shots, so the audience will not be interrupted by any confusion during their viewing of the film.
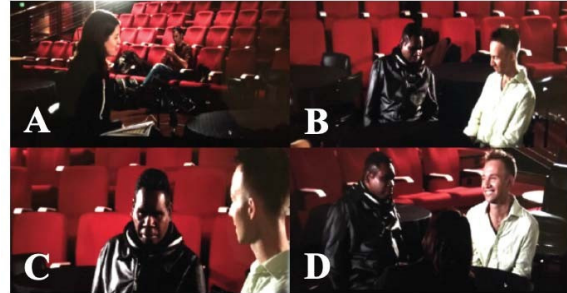

Figure 8: 180º rule

5 CREATIVE PRACTICE IMPLEMENTATION

Having the freedom to play with the creative skills during editing of the documentary, we wanted to experiment with establishing the story flow, but it was also important to us to consider the narrative continuity.

Figure 9 shows the notes that we have written during brainstorming; we picked up three main points to be executed for the filming, such as 180º, over the shoulder, and action match. Eye line match and change location are additional points that are used for shot and location continuity.

In addition, in the pre-production process, it is important to have the list of questions ready that will be asked to the subject. However, it is better to give the questions to the subject prior to starting the filming, so if there are any questions that make the subject uncomfortable, these can be discussed beforehand.
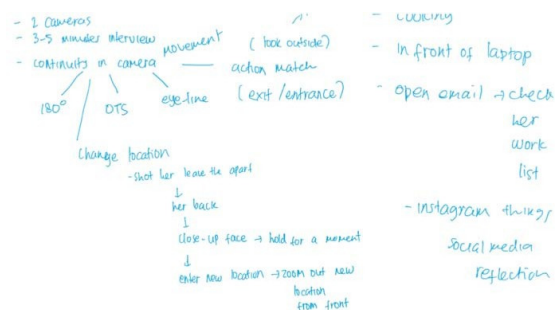

Figure 9: Note for the preproduction stage.

Figure 10: List of questions.

Figure 11: Opening part of "Indri" documentary film.

The documentary starts by showing the shots where Indri mentions some sentences that describe Indri's feeling about her contributions to any organisation activities. This type of opening can make the audience curious about what the story is about.

The next scene reveals the character walking from one place to another, also known as change in location. According to Dancyger (2018), 'rather than show the character [moving] from point A to point B, the editor often shows her departing' (2018, p. 305). Hence, we decided to show the shot from over the shoulder, shot from her back, and continued her departing in the next shot to demonstrate that she moves from one location to another location.

We use the montage sequence that we adapted from the *Whiteley* documentary film (see Figure 4). Even though this technique of editing does not offer more in terms of effect in continuity, the montage

sequence can be helpful to construct and support the story flow.

Figure 12 is the one scene that we use the 180º camera placement rule in which that position is commonly used to show two people interacting. Over the shoulder is employed as 180º rule that shows two characters in the same frame. Shot A and B in Figure 12 shows one side of the screen of the head and back of the speaker's; it gives the space to show another character in another side of the screen. This is one example of implementation of continuity, not only for preserving the match action, but also for screen direction continuity.

Figure 12: Change in location.

Figure 13: Montage sequence.

Figure 14: 180º rule.

6 CONCLUSIONS

It is important to pay more attention to continuity during the editing process. However, during the research and the creative practice, we realise that continuity is not entirely about how we create the continuity in visual, but we also need to consider other components that will contribute to an interesting film. For example, first, it is essential to have a smooth flow of the story in addition to the inclusion of continuity shots. During the production stage, we recorded all the questions in order, but in the editing

process, we needed to choose the relevant part of the interview in terms of providing the particular information to the audience and arrange the parts to establish clear story flow. The flow of the story emerges from the continuity which is achieved through selection of the right shots to support the content. At this stage, we know that having a lot of extra footage can be beneficial for creative work. Unfortunately, we did not allocate more time to shoot more footage during the production, so we do not have many options of shots to choose from to support the visual aesthetic. Hence, we decided to cut down the duration from the initial plan of three minutes as the plan to two minutes with the consideration of having clear story flow content and support from available extra footage. It is because we do not want to enforce to have three-minute documentary, but the story and visual are not credible.

The main concern of the research relates to the application of several camera angle techniques and correct placement; for the two-minute length of the project, the big challenge for us has been that we cannot use the selected techniques throughout the entire film. Hence, we need to combine and play with the shots of the interview section, apply the camera techniques, and put the extra footage in to help us give visual variation to attract the audience's attention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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