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Name of Course: Television specialisation
Lecturer: Paul Hills
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Title of essay assignment:

Write a self-reflective report concerning your production of your 10 minute documentary.

I hereby declare that this essay is my own work. I have acknowledged all other authors' ideas and referenced direct quotations from their work. I have not allowed anyone else to borrow or copy my work.

Jans (C.J.) de Jager

Date

In the production of “A hard day’s night” I have experienced a shift in what I feel what our roles are in the production crew, Shot Productions. Since the start of the year it has definitely been our biggest production in terms of planning, shooting and editing. It has been very challenging on different terrains such as language use and certain filming obstacles. One big obstacle has been finding a focus and a storyline in the documentary. Altogether the whole experience was greatly rewarding and a very educational experience. While the documentary did not achieve a good academic mark it has brought my attention to certain problems which exist within our crew. For our next production it will be necessary to concentrate on these problems in order to achieve a better product.

For better or worse the roles we have assigned to ourselves for our production have mostly overlapped and substituted each other. Setting out we assigned Amanda to be director, Lindile as producer, and myself as cameraperson. Yet in the end the duties and functions you would expect from these roles did not stick. The role of producer might be said to plan resources, to plan and set up shoots, and deliberate between the crew. I was the only crewmember with a driver’s license (something which has prompted me to offer driving lessons) and the petrol cost was split between me and Amanda; we took turns to do the intimidating work of phone calls and planned shoots together; Amanda kept minutes and kept the contact list along with Lindile and we took turns to fill out personal release forms; and when some friction resulted between me and Amanda about doing a shoot out of Grahamstown we solved the conflict without Lindy’s help. The director can be said to arrange the characters and storyline, on paper and during shoots. Yet deciding which subjects to interview was always a collaborative process with no veto right given to anyone; I took the liberty to start the scripting process when we had a serious lack of hard-copy direction; and during shoots whoever was working with the camera tended to compose the shot and direct the subject’s placement. As cameraperson I acted more as assistant and because we took turns to operate the camera and sound gear for interviews and cut-aways. My value was giving input concerning shot composition and pointing to technical problems I could notice such as lighting and sound.

In the end, despite sharing our functions, we all tended to find our positions where we fit the best. For me, the position of directing seemed to befit my interests and actions most. From the start my interest in the story was to find the underlying story and relevance to the reader. Even if bucket toilets are such an atrocity as sanitation and

bucket work is so degrading, why does the reader care and what character narrative demonstrates it as such? During shoots I found myself directing the position of characters and their environments, even when I was not operating the camera. When I was not in the position of interviewer I regularly chipped in to add questions that I thought we would need to fill in the narrative arcs. Lindile tended to do more camerawork than the two of us and demonstrated more adaptability to the new camera we were supplied than Amanda did. Amanda took care of the minutes, diary, most of the contact list details and fulfilled a lot of the producer functions. Lindile and I split up the transcript logging and the final edit was done by Amanda and Lindile.

The use of language became quite a contentious issue for us. Four subjects were interviewed in their home language (two in Xhosa and two in English) and three subjects were interviewed in English despite it not being their home language (Xhosa). While it would have better to interview everyone in their home language (in order for them to explain themselves as well as possible) this would not have been practical for production (in terms of translating) and for the viewer (too much subtitling is not desirable). As such finding a middle ground was most wanting. Subjects who could converse with relative ease in English were interviewed as such and Xhosa was limited to the two subjects who couldn't converse in English.

One of the main challenges was shooting the bucket workers collecting buckets. It was strenuous work because the workers move fast (as would be expected since they do the work every night) and the truck does not stop moving. As such it was necessary to find places where our car could be parked for later return and then follow the workers on foot. Lighting was also difficult because the light-carriers do not know what the shot looks like and as such it would be up to the camera-person to instruct their positions. It was furthermore not always feasible to ask the workers to stop for a second to demonstrate a pose because of the nature of their work and the language barrier (none of the workers seem able or willing to speak English).

For the assignment it was required to produce a piece of work that was technically perfect. In this respect we did well to acquire high quality sound despite being forced to work with a camera that was new to us (and which offered no functionality to listen to our recordings in the field). We did well to use a variety of microphones to suit the circumstances and specifically made use of the rifle microphone quite regularly. With interviews we took special caution to set up lighting perfectly to eliminate shadows and gain even complexion in our subjects. We wanted to compose meaningful shots for the

subjects but it was not always possible depending on time constraints and times that they were available. We managed to interview the bucket truck driver Speerman at the Mayfield sewage works (even though it was not included in the final edit), and did an interview with a resident who complained about the bucket toilet at her house.

Despite our best intentions the final product did not fulfil the technical quality that was required. While most of the shots were of acceptable quality one specific interview contained a lot of lens flares from shooting into the sun. Unfortunately it was a critical interview which could not be repeated or excluded. Because of a fluke in editing the class screening contained flashing frames for that interview. Even though the computer version and web version did not contain this fluke and was maybe of a higher technical quality, when screening a film to clients such a problem would make an incredibly bad impression. It is necessary to create a product which will be flawless on the majority of screening systems that could be employed. As such it would be necessary to test the final product by watching it from start to finish.

Another objection which came about concerning the production was the clarity of the concept. While constructing our story we were confronted with many different opinions. It was difficult to find a particular focus for the story or a introductory paragraph that would concretise all our work into a coherent film. We had spent much of our research on issues that surfaced from our original starting point of the story: a photo-essay by a SAMWU (South African Municipal Workers' Union) co-ordinator which portrayed the work as highly degrading and demonstrated the social ostracisation and municipal neglect the workers felt. From the start the main attraction to the story was the visual appeal of the bucket work which had not been given much visual representation at that point. Apart from this visual appeal and the investigation into the social treatment of the workers, the story had no immediately apparent hard news hook. There was no recent prominent event that could be used as a fresh perspective on the story. The basic story which had circulated up to then was that the bucket system was an inhumane system of sanitation that needed to be replaced with flushing toilets.

If there was any new perspective on the story it was specifically the working conditions of bucket workers and the suspected deaths related to it. If we were to have made a more appealing film then we should have concentrated on this fact and investigated it more than the inhumanity of the bucket system. Why we hadn't done this might be because a lack of direction from the start of the project. We hadn't really made any hard-line decisions along the way to what issues to focus on. It might be that we

were intimidated by the length of the documentary and as such decided to interview as many different sources as possible and so have no shortage of footage to work with in the end.

Our lack of direction might also be related to the weakness of our production roles. When it came to editorial decisions we all had ideas about what we wanted the story to be about. It usually came down to majority voting of Amanda and Lindile against me when it came to issues such as shooting outside of Grahamstown or choosing sources. In one instance the sources that they had chosen did not give them the necessary feedback so my preferred choices were used as backup. Essentially we had entered into a complicated power game to control the production of the documentary and choose parts of it for ourselves without working towards a central direction.

The cause of this problem might also have been a fault of my own. Since the beginning of the year I had developed the idea that I controlled most of our production too closely and was essentially dominating Lindile and Amanda and depriving them from developing their own views and abilities. This was most clear with the editing (in which I was possibly the most proficient at the beginning of the year), but also became clear with choosing timetables, sources, stories, shots and general direction. At one point I had decided to step back and try to allow them to work out some leadership ability between them which I could then follow. With the bucket documentary it was a conscious choice and every time I felt that I was making decisions too quickly I felt that I needed to consult with them and transfer the duty over to them by limiting my involvement. This was because of a twisted sense of guilt but also because I felt their development would be inhibited at the early stage by becoming too dependent on me. By doing this I was essentially neglecting my duty as preferred director to make those decisions with input from them. If I had felt the responsibility of those decisions I would have probably given the production more conceptual value from the start. I also did not take part in the editing process so was not involved in the final conceptual development.

As such it now becomes clear to me that it my responsibility to stop sacrificing the quality of the final product for the development of my team-mates. I believe that they are entirely competent individuals who can take care of their own responsibilities and they trust me enough to take care of mine. When we are producing our next project I intend to manage their involvement in the conceptual development with the mutual understanding that it is my responsibility and they must limit their involvement to

giving suggestions and to giving serious objections. As such it will become necessary for Amanda to embrace the important role of production planning and managing our time and resources. It is a role that she has given indication to being her main interest and administration and organisation is something that she is experienced in. Lindile must take responsibility of aesthetics and technical quality. She has given indication of liking to work with the camera and she is a person who enjoys beauty and quality.

In the end the production was very informative and the experience was invaluable, in terms of handling group dynamics, but also from a technical angle finding ways to overcome obstacles in our way. The main realisation has been the definition and importance of our roles and relationships within the production.