

**Self reflective essay: Peter Nielsen**

I was inspired to propose “Wheel turn” after watching a documentary about wheelchair rugby in the United States called Murderball. I was excited because it overturned the passive stereotype that disabled people are normally represented as. ‘Murderball’ was obviously produced on a much grander scale, but after watching it twice I was able to borrow certain stylistic techniques for the treatment, such as the setting up of interviews and borrowing certain strong themes and minor arcs and adapting them to wheelchair basketball and a South African context. I also chose to copy the way they edited the final game to music, where the game did not matter in the greater narrative structure.

I also had a personal involvement in disability through my father’s paralysis as a child, and I was drawn to doing something that had a human-interest element. This was recognition of the fact that Grahamstown stories, for me, would simply not be enough for my final documentary. This feeling was even stronger following our second term disaster. In addition, I had watched wheelchair basketball before through going to the Mandeville centre in Johannesburg, South Africa’s Paralympics headquarters.

My specialised knowledge in disability allowed me to find contacts over the phone, and my father’s disability gave me an instant ‘in’ during the pre-production stage, where people were willing to give me their time and forward my requests for help onto other people. It was in this way that I eventually contacted the two teams and established their upcoming game.

My role as director during production was both challenging and enjoying. In addition, I was also team driver by virtue of the fact that we used my car for the majority of the travelling.

We were well prepared whenever we left for shoots, whereby Theresa and I would build a daily shooting schedule, either in Grahamstown or on arrival in Port Elizabeth or East London.

Directing appealed to me because I had proposed the story and built the contacts, and we were well prepared enough that all I really had to do was work off my lists and questions through the shooting days. Driving the team to get what we needed from the shot list was a challenging task, especially when the days got longer

and seemingly pointless cutaways or set ups still had to be shot. By and large though, we accomplished everything we had set up in the preparation phases.

During interviews I would ask the questions. Using my history with disability allowed to establish a common ground with our case studies, I felt that people were more comfortable with me because they knew my father was also disabled. It was important to me to lead up to the harder deeper questions about their disabilities and the difficulties they still face in everyday life, so I preferred to start with basketball questions and work my way into their life stories. At the same time, I took notes on visuals and follow up questions that were not in the shot list or question list. For example, after Deonette's interview, we had to get additional photographs from her childhood and her medical records that dealt with her meningitis.

Coming up with new ideas on location was really rewarding. For example, we needed to get Deonette taking off her prosthetics. By working together with Theresa on camera we were able to compose a beautiful symbolic shot that would later work together with music to set the scene. So the relationship between what I was trying to accomplish on a visual level and how it came out on tape was rewarding; after viewing the rushes I was able to build on what we had accomplished and rethink or modify other potential areas that could be exploited.

On the ground, I had high expectations for the quality we were looking to produce. In the first week of term Theresa and I had gone on a 'refresher' trip to East London on a Carte Blanche at Frere hospital. We brought back a lot of skills that we tried to utilise in the shoots, such as shooting interview cutaways and thinking about how many different sets of sequences we would need for each case study. I also took my time, whereas in the past I have been hurried in my analysis of what we need. At all times I would be thinking about what I needed for a good edit.

However, my high expectations and personality led to some frustrations on the ground, which finally boiled over while we were shooting in East London. I didn't feel that Jessica was performing to the level I expected, and it was getting in the way during the shoots. I also didn't appreciate questioning the underlying reasons over how we were going about getting the material, especially when I was trying to get things done as the director. Ultimately, these issues should have been dealt with in Grahamstown, and I think we had more than enough space within the group to discuss these matters in pre-production. More to the point, Jess couldn't fulfil her role as

soundperson when it came to using a rifle mic, which led to the two of us swapping roles in East London. This was the last straw for me.

Once we returned from East London, we needed a consultation to smooth things over. I was too angry and frustrated to resolve the situation in a practical way. Had I calmed down enough, I should have thought to simplify the rifle mic setup straight into the camera. However, I enjoyed getting things out in the open after walking on eggshells for the past two terms. The consultation ensured that we were calm as a group as it redefined the goals and processes for the rest of the shoots, which went according to plan.

With two and half weeks to deadline, I sat down to edit the piece. I edited on Premiere Pro, which was a step back to third year. However, I didn't want to dominate the editing and using Premiere meant anyone could play with the sequences should they choose. There was enough time to use Avid, but in the end using Premiere took a lot of stress off my shoulders.

Between Theresa and myself all the tapes had been captured and logged during the shoots. After an edit meeting, we had a rough idea of where we wanted the piece to go.

The first edit held together for about ten minutes, but then lost its way. On a personal level, I think I was overexcited about finishing and didn't pay enough attention to the narrative flow. As a result, the first edit was discarded for the most part and looking back, my edit was overly ambitious in its aims.

This had helped me get into the editing rhythm, whereby I worked on a system of five finished minutes a day. This gave me time to work on my individual in the evenings as well. Because of the planning through the term I knew we still had enough time re-edit. The biggest help was the whiteboard, without which I would have never known where our final champagne glass edit was going.

It was good to have Theresa with me in the late morning and afternoons, as she could comment on what I had done in the morning and had more distance from the piece than myself, and she could see where pieces were not flowing. Also, as cameraperson, she could suggest visuals that might be replaced with better cutaway.

The final three minutes were edited to music, which was a nice way to finish the edit, as I didn't have to concentrate on the narrative, which had resolved itself in the main. I edited the game to the beat, and changed the pace of the cuts to the pace of the music. The piece of music defined how long the final credits would be, which ran

to just over 50 seconds. Finally, we were finished. With the extra time, I was able to do a solid grading and colour mix, while Theresa did the final audio mix. We then delegated out the final paperwork for the file.

I think “Wheel turn” reflects the hard work that we put in as a group. It was definitely the hardest I had worked this year. The most important thing I learnt was how to construct a narrative in the edit, which was a weak point in my editing skill set. The first edit was too complicated, but the second kept it simple. Without all the time we had in postproduction, the consultations would not have directed and helped the process as much as they did. I enjoyed directing a documentary for the first time, especially something that had a personal interest to me. Ultimately, I think I achieved in my individual roles as director and editor, and I am happy with the final result.