

The Hours

An Honors Thesis

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim Pollard", written in a cursive style.

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Abstract

The topic of gay marriage is a relevant issue that is becoming increasingly more important in the eyes of the American public. Because marriages between same sex couples are not recognized or valid in this country, neither are the benefits. These benefits include insurance, familial benefits, and benefits concerning advantages of immigration. This problem becomes even more apparent when one of these partners is from a different country. This is called a bi-national marriage. In a bi-national marriage between same-sex couples, the situation commonly results in the foreign partner being forced to leave the United States, and their loved ones, behind. Because Joanna cannot stay in the country legally, she must return to her home country of New Zealand after her visa has expired. We decided it would be significant to document the emotions surrounding their last day and night in the same country until they reunite again in four months.

Acknowledgments

-We would like to thank Mr. Tim Pollard for being our advisor for this project. We always appreciate his criticism and welcome his advice.

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Creative Project Rationale

Because of the fact that our major is telecommunications, since the beginning of our freshman year of college, we knew our honors thesis would be in the form of a video project; we just didn't know what kind of video project. Initially, we planned on making a documentary about the history of black people in film. It related to our major and also allowed us to research our cultural history. However, a much more timely project fell into our laps. We learned that our friend Brittany had gotten married, but because she was married to another woman, their marriage was and still is not legally recognized in the United States as a citizen. To make matters worse, her wife, Joanna, is from New Zealand, meaning she cannot legally reside in the United States. And unfortunately, they are not welcome to the immigration and permanent residency benefits that would be afforded to a bi-national couple of opposite sexes. We thought their story would be a very fascinating one to tell. We'd always supported civil rights, and have even protested the "gay marriage ban" bill in Indianapolis with Brittany on one occasion. We thought a documentary focusing on the struggles of bi-national, same sex couples would give us a wonderful opportunity to mix our values with our major.

In creating this project, we utilized many of the lessons we were taught in the video classes we took during our study at Ball State. We thought the best way to approach the project would be to use the documentary style filmmaking we learned in Intermediate video class. We chose this method because we wanted to make the film relatable on a personal level. In documentary video, many of the creative decisions are done for the benefit of the audience. We wanted the audience to be able to get to know Brittany and Joanna as they were welcoming the viewers into their homes and their lives.

We decided the best way to do that would be to follow the girls around with a camera, recording many of their intimate moments as they lived their lives as usual.

The title "The Hours" emerges from the fact that the video takes place during the last few hours Brittany and Joanna spent together in the United States. It's important that the title be both meaningful and memorable. The video doesn't even span twenty-four hours, so Joanna and Brittany have less than a full day to spend with each other until they are separated for four months. In addition, "All The Hours" is the title of a song Brittany wrote for Joanna. That song is featured in the closing moments of the video. Also considering the title, we chose to insert the time at the bottom of the screen in various points throughout the film as a sort of countdown to the end.

As we learned in video class, one of the most difficult components of video is trying to decide which sound bites to include. With over thirty minutes of interview footage, we were forced to condense their words into less than six minutes (the last two minutes lack sound bites entirely). We chose the sound bites that would effectively convey their story in the shortest amount of time possible. For instance, they talked about the legality of the United States immigration laws for more than 5 minutes, but we manage to shorten that discussion into two sentences. Their words were abbreviated, but they still maintained their significance.

Another device used in many documentary films is the title screens, or text on screen. We used these titles screens in between various segments to give the audience background information about the history of same sex marriage laws, as well as information about Brittany and Joanna's relationship. We wanted to be as brief as possible in explaining what was going on so that the title screens were not used as

primary narration. As we were taught in class, the picture is supposed to tell the story, not the words on screen. We only used text to provide information that would not have otherwise been available to the audience. In addition, we thought it would be important that the audience understand the educational aspect to the bi-national, same-sex couple predicament. That is why we included the statistics.

We used black for the title screens because we wanted the words to be simple and not distracting. There is a drop shadow on the words that causes them to pop out from the screen. Also, the gradient on the black background helps set the somber tone as well as forcing the eyes to concentrate towards the center of the screen. The white text moves in a way that makes them appear to be floating towards the camera. It's always a good idea to have the text be mobile, as to create more energy. This gives the viewers a place to concentrate their attention, similar to the effect created by the gradient.

The video opens with Brittany tuning her guitar, followed by her quote about "soul mates." In videos such as these, it's common to start the picture before introducing the film as a way of introducing the characters before presenting the title. Brittany is shown tuning her guitar before the title screen comes up. Also, her quote about being "soul mates" establishes for the audience that these two girls are in a romantic relationship. Someone might assume that they were simply best friends. After all, they aren't overly physical with each other throughout the film. Right away, we decided that we must establish that the girls are in love. The girls also chose to duet a fairly romantic song, "You Are My Sunshine," which represented their feelings through its lyrics.

The importance of "telling the story" was very heavily emphasized in our video classes. The girls are essentially the only two people in the entire film, save for the

unavoidable cameos by both Brittany's mother and Marggy's forehead. We wanted this to be an intimate portrayal of two girls, as if they were the only two people in their world. We didn't want outside influences or input by anyone other than them. That is why their interview is the only one featured in the video. Had we introduced other characters, it would have distracted the audience from the point or focus of the film.

As Joanna is at Brittany's house, packing her things to leave, the video is edited with many jump cuts. We did this deliberately, as to make the moment seem more rushed. Also this is another editing technique we have developed while studying production.

Using still pictures was a perfect way to give the audience a visual, other than the interview and b-roll footage. We used three pictures of Brittany and Joanna in a row, and one at the end, before the farewell sequence begins. It is important that the audience see Joanna and Brittany happy together in a setting other than just the video. The still pictures give a glimpse into their past relationship, helping them understand the history of their relationship. The audience must see the relationship in order to recognize the story the video is trying to tell.

We decided to make the airport scenes blue because up until that point, the video was in full color. We wanted there to be a contrast, similar to the abrupt change of emotion. As the girls reach the airport, we wanted the audience to visually experience what the girls were feeling inside. The color blue is notorious for conveying the feeling of sorrow. Therefore, immediately upon their arrival to the airport, the entire video was saturated with a subtle blue hue.

Initially, the end scene with the two girls was in full color. However, our advisor,

Tim Pollard, brought up the fact that the video had been arranged chronologically, up until that point. Joanna had already gotten on the plane and he thought going back in time was confusing for the audience. We agreed. He suggested that we alter the end scene and make it black and white, as to suggest that the scene was a memory or to show the audience that we are going back in time. We thought that was a fantastic idea. It gave the video even more poignancy. There was Brittany, happily singing to her wife, but the audience knows that she won't truly get to experience that again, for four more months.

Music is commonly used to the detriment of many videos, but we made sure to use it as an aid, not a crutch. We learned that Brittany had written a song for Joanna ending with the words "marry me," so we thought that it would be perfect to use in the video. We featured the song in the farewell sequence, as Joanna packs up to leave for the airport. We thought it would make the ending that much more poignant. However, we didn't want the sequence to look like a music video. In our intermediate video class, we were taught to include some of the background noise in the scene while the song is playing. That is why you can still hear the sounds such as the bark of the dogs and the closing of the door.

Also, to prevent the "music video" effect, those scenes feature various sound bites from the interview. We didn't want the interview to be on camera, because we wanted the audience's attention to be focused on Joanna's departure. We did want to use those sound bites to help narrate the emotion of the scene, though. We decided it would be the most affective for the audience if the sound bites stopped as they made their way to the airport. So immediately as they start driving to the airport those sound bites drop out and

the background noise is muted. All your attention is on the girls and on the lyrics of the song. Those lyrics are so telling and emotional. The music is front and center, taking the place of the sound bites, but continuing to narrate the story as if it were spoken dialogue. And as the last line of the song “marry me” plays, the audience sees Brittany’s distraught face and a heartbreaking wave goodbye.

In fact, Brittany's music is featured throughout the entirety of the video. We already knew that Brittany was a musician and thought this would be the perfect project to showcase her talent. We used the introductions to many of her prerecorded songs, save for the last song. For the closing sequence, we asked her to sing the song for us live, as we recorded her on camera. You can see that at the end of the video, she's singing her love song to Joanna.

The last segment of the video is the title screen that explains the details of the Defense of Marriage Act. We wanted this to be the final commentary on the video. Instead of inserting some kind of call to action, we wanted the audience to simply be aware of the injustices that exist within the laws of the United States. We thought it would be the final emotional blow of the whole video, after all the tears.

We did not want the film to be overly talky and we did not want to deluge the audience with statistics and information. We wanted the film to be simple and poignant. Our finished product represents a culmination of everything we’ve learned during our production option at Ball State.

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