

Institution: The University of Edinburgh
Unit of Assessment: 28A Modern Languages
Title of case study: A Scottish Self-Portrait: The Northern Lights Documentary Project
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Northern Lights was a University of Edinburgh research project that engaged members of the Scottish public in documenting their lives on camera. Its objective was to create a novel, multi-perspective documentary portrait of the Scottish nation in 2012. The project had enormous scope: press and media impact reached over 4 million people. Northern Lights made its impact by empowering the 1,500 individuals who contributed video portraits to explore issues such as addiction, disabilities and mental health. Northern Lights thus opened up a unique opportunity for participants to represent their experience, voicing, for themselves and for a wider, national audience, often poorly understood and neglected sectors of society.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>From 2004-13, Dr Nick Higgins was successively Lecturer and Senior Lecturer in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Edinburgh. His research interests focus on the experiences of marginalised social and ethnic groups in Scotland and Latin America: his monograph (2004, see 3.4) on the Chiapas rebellion revealed a centuries-long protest over the Maya people's identity and place within Mexico.</p> <p>Higgins is also an internationally acclaimed documentary filmmaker who has used documentary film as an innovative aesthetic medium through which to explore sociopolitical issues. Questions of mental health, addiction, ethnicity and identity drive his documentary research as well as his written research. Emphasising the creative participation of the film subjects in the filmmaking process, Higgins encourages the self-articulation of marginalised social groups; subsequent screenings have produced the further impact of creating empathy in audiences from across the social spectrum for the experiences of these groups.</p> <p>An early documentary project, <i>Women in Black</i> (2004) explored the challenge of representing a silent, women-only peace protest movement. Higgins sought to capture their experience in documentary form, which resulted in a film that was broadcast on television (2004), a screening at the Nobel Peace Awards in Oslo (2005) and, immediately following broadcast, the creation of three new protest groups in cities across Scotland. The positive impact this research generated inspired Higgins to use the documentary form in another project on the creative and emotional life of the schizophrenic artist extraordinaire, Angus MacPhee. This work won several awards, including best documentary at the Britspotting Festival in Berlin in 2005, and has been viewed by over 3 million people worldwide. Mental health professionals in the UK and USA continue to use the film as a means to explore art and mental illness.</p> <p>In 2007, Higgins completed the film <i>A Massacre Foretold</i>, the result of 5 years of research on the massacre in 1997 of 45 unarmed Indians in Acteal, Mexico (3.3). The feature-length documentary premiered at the Edinburgh International Film Festival (EIFF), screened at over 40 international festivals, has been broadcast on 4 international television stations, and in 2007 won the WAAC/SIGNIS Award for best Human Rights Documentary.</p> <p>Higgins's interest in the representation of human rights issues led to a further award-winning film in 2008, <i>The New Ten Commandments</i>, a documentary response to the question of individual Human Rights in Scotland (3.2). This project gathered together ten co-directors, including Oscar winner Tilda Swinton and Turner Prize winner Douglas Gordon, and produced an educational publication (3.5).</p>

The BAFTA Scotland-nominated Northern Lights (2012), his most ambitious project yet, is the result of several years of refining this approach to documentary film as research tool and output simultaneously (3.1, 5.10). The findings of Higgins's practice-based research are thus twofold: first, they reflect on documentary film as an invaluable research tool for gaining knowledge about neglected social groups; second, because the means of the filmmaking process encourages the creative participation of these groups, the end product of the film captures in a unique manner the voices of the marginalized.

3. References to the research

Links archived at <http://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/REF2014REF3B/UoA+28A>

Documentary Films:

3.1 **Northern Lights**, 2013. www.wearenorthernlights.com

Evidence of Quality: Creative Scotland, the National Lottery and the Mental Health Foundation awarded Higgins a "Once in a Lifetime" grant of £260k (March 2012 – Jan. 2013) for this project.

3.2 PI on feature-length documentary (with co-directors Tilda Swinton, Irvine Welsh, Douglas Gordon et al.), **The New Ten Commandments:** www.newtencommandments.co.uk

Evidence of Quality: Scottish Screen, the Scottish Arts Council and BBC Scotland awarded Higgins a grant of £285k for this project (Feb. 2008 – Dec. 2008).

Awards:

Winner Best Broadcast Award, Refugee Festival, Scotland 2009.

Winner Student Jury Award, DokumentART Film Festival, Germany & Poland 2009.

Screenings:

Invited to Screen at the Scottish Parliament in 2009; Theatrical Release: 14 cinemas in Scotland (Dec. 2000 – Feb. 2009); broadcast on BBC Scotland (Dec. 2008); screened at international festivals including premiere at the EIFF in 2008, which was attended by the Minister of Culture.

3.3 **A Massacre Foretold**, 2008: www.massacreforetold.com

Evidence of Quality: This film won the WAAC/SIGNIS Best Human Rights Film Award 2007 and was Nominated Sky Movies Documentary Award, UK 2007. It was screened at over 40 international film festivals, at the Universities of Yale, Harvard and Berkeley, and received 4 international TV broadcasts. It was front-page story on Mexico's national newspaper, *La Jornada*, and featured in *El Universal*, *The Herald*, *The Scotsman*, *The Sunday Herald*, and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Publications:

3.4 N. Higgins (2004). *Understanding the Chiapas Rebellion: Modernist Visions and the Invisible Indian*. Austin: U of Texas P. Evidence of Quality: Reviews in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, *Development and Change*, *American Anthropologist*, *Journal of Latin-Latino American Studies*. (Can be supplied by HEI on request).

3.5 N. Higgins & A. Cole (2012). *Learning Through Film: Human Rights In Scotland*. Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh, 2012): www.learningthroughfilm.co.uk

4. Details of the impact

The Northern Lights documentary film project, which obtained £250k in grant support from Creative Scotland, was launched on 20 March 2012 by Scottish Minister for Culture, Fiona Hyslop. The key insight of this project is that the creation of audio-visual representations can have transformational effects on the lives of often overlooked and culturally contested individuals and groups. Northern Lights seeks to apply this insight to the whole of Scotland. Going further than any previous research project by attempting to democratise the filmmaking process, it invited members of the public to film their own lives and communities, in any language. Northern Lights thus gave everyone in Scotland the opportunity to participate in the creation of a unique documentary portrait of the nation in 2012.

Its impact was to alter the self-perceptions of minority groups in Scotland, and also the mainstream's perception of these groups. Impact was two-pronged: it occurred during the creative process and also afterwards, with the release of the feature film in February 2013. Participant responses, both to the project's preparatory workshops (5.3) and on the project website (<http://wearenorthernlights.com/submissions/listen/>), testify to the ongoing impact of the creative process and finished product on those who got involved. The project's Facebook and Twitter accounts evidence the ongoing impact of the film on Scottish audiences (5.1).

The breadth of the impact is evident in the engagement in the project of many different individuals and social groups. Working with the Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure for Scotland (5.8) and the Scottish Mental Health Foundation (5.7), both umbrella groups for hundreds of smaller local organisations, Higgins enabled widespread participation by designing a two-day intensive filmmaking workshop, so that interested parties would know how to make their own films. He delivered 30 workshops to communities across Scotland, and 20 two-hour introductory ideas sessions to members of the general public. For those unable to attend, he created online instructional video tutorials (<http://wearenorthernlights.com/get-involved/preparing/>). Members of the public were thus enabled to make films about "their Scotland" on any format, including mobile phones, video cameras and digital cameras. They then uploaded their footage to the Northern Lights website.

The public buy-in to the project was extensive: by the end of the three-month submission period the project had received over 1,500 video submissions, generating over 300 hours of footage, clear evidence of the reach of Higgins's workshops on diverse communities around Scotland, including youth groups and OAPs, Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland and groups with experience of mental health difficulties. Feedback from the workshops testifies to a sense of empowerment felt by individuals in getting hands-on experience of film as a representative medium: "I've learned a lot about cameras, how to film, what to shoot and what not to shoot. I'd love to make more films in the future. That's the dream" (Jamie Price — STUC Workshop, Glasgow, 5.3).

The submitted material was then edited into a 98-minute documentary. For those who provided video submissions, the experience of seeing their own small contribution unified as part of a final audio-visual portrait generated a further level of impact, as the recorded video responses and online testimony show. A typical example of feedback is: "Thanks to Northern Lights workshop I discovered how to communicate my world with picture and sound!" (Soozie Tarkenter — Hearing disability, <http://wearenorthernlights.com/submissions/listen/>).

The positive effects on participants are thus considerable. Higgins has helped empower individuals to create their own personal media representations that in the process have enriched and expanded their life worlds and imaginations. This effect is especially important for the often disadvantaged and marginalised groups the project targeted. In addition to the impact of making creative and coherent audio-visual sense of their lives, these groups have been positively affected by their inclusion in the project (5.7, 5.8). It has enabled them literally to see themselves alongside other members of society and thus experience a social visibility and recognition that is rare, both in research projects and in wider society. This comes across powerfully in their self-description as film directors: 121 participants list themselves as film directors on the IMDb website (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2733992/fullcredits?ref_=tt_ql_1).

Beyond the impact of face-to-face encounters, the Northern Lights website was the main interface for the project. It provided video-making support, and submissions could be viewed on the site. The site received between 2,000 and 3,500 unique visitors per day, with an overall total of 55,000 site visitors in the 3-month submission period (5.4). The project's Facebook page and Twitter feed created an online community complementing the project's offline activities (5.1). The Facebook page had a weekly reach of 4,000 people, with over 250,000 people talking about the project. The Twitter feed had 1,495 followers, with a reach of many more thousands (5.2).

The public impact of the project can also be measured by the considerable print and broadcast press coverage it received, including features on the BBC, STV, Radio Scotland, *The Herald*, *The*

Sun, and *The Mail on Sunday*. The film was described as capturing “the very essence of Scotland. Unmissable” (*Evening Times*, 14.2.13), “a joy to watch”, conveying “a joyous sense of nationhood”, “Scotland as it perceives itself, with no voices silenced” (*Eye for Film*, 6.2.13) (5.5). Based on viewer and circulation figures, the project reached over 4 million people in Scotland and beyond (5.9)

The Cineworld cinema chain released the film across Scotland — the first ever Scottish documentary to receive such distribution. It has screened in New York as part of the Scotland-Tartan Week celebrations, and in June and July 2013 it travelled to rural communities in Scotland with the UK’s only mobile cinema, the Screen Machine. In total it has received 196 screenings since its premiere in February 2013. The Scottish Government Culture Secretary has said: “Northern Lights has set a standard for cultural projects — it’s reached out to our diverse communities and inspired them to think about how they can use culture and creativity — not only to promote their local identity but to enhance community engagement” (5.6). On 16 May 2013 the SNP passed a motion to announce that the Scottish Parliament considered that Northern Lights, which it described as “an excellent initiative”, “gives a superb range of images of Scotland, [...] including superb scenery and socially challenging issues, such as drug problems” (<http://tinyurl.com/olzwyf>). On 8 October 2013 BAFTA Scotland nominated Northern Lights for the Cineworld Audience Award 2013 (5.10).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

The following sources can be supplied by the HEI on request. All listed weblinks are to an original page, but should they be unavailable a PDF can be found at: <http://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/REF2014REF3B/UoA+28A>

5.1 Audience Reactions to We Are Northern Lights (PDF file). Corroborates positive audience reactions to the project.

5.2 Pre_release_social_media_data (Excel file). Corroborates statistics for Facebook and Twitter.

5.3 See Northern Lights: Interim Report (PDF file). Corroborates positive experience for participants in the preparatory workshops, also the groups Higgins targeted.

5.4 We are Northern Lights traffic statistics (PDF file). Corroborates no. of visitors to the NL website.

5.5 Press_quotes (PDF file). Corroborates positive media reception of film.

5.6 Scottish Government Culture Secretary. Corroborates statement on Northern Lights as role model for cultural projects that creatively engage diverse Scottish communities.

5.7 Chief Executive, Scottish Mental Health Foundation. Corroborates the inclusive nature of the project for groups affected by mental health issues.

5.8 Chief Executive, Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure for Scotland. Corroborates the inclusive nature of the project for ethnic minorities.

5.9 WIRE_Report (Excel file). Corroborates circulation figures (radio and media) for Northern Lights, in Scotland and beyond.

5.10 <http://tinyurl.com/of7dr59> Corroborates BAFTA Scotland nomination for Cineworld Audience Award 2013.