

Questions for Beverly Thompson

How do you utilize ethnographic skills in making your documentaries? Can you provide specific examples?

Traditional ethnographic training absolutely comes through with creating documentary filmmaking. This type of technical training found in methods books outlines the ways in which to find and approach participants, the ways to frame open, non-leading questions, protect confidentiality, collecting informative information, and writing up the data. Making documentary films uses all of these practical skills—but it goes further, by bringing in the visual element that usual compromises keeping confidentiality, and adding another layer of information.

Do you consider your documentaries sociological? Why or why not? (How are they sociological?)

My documentaries are sociological. They are sociological because they are representative of larger social issues, which are explored in qualitative data that reflect the larger statistical information on the topic. While I focus on fewer numbers of people, their stories and examples are representative of the larger population.

How do you integrate visual and audio in your approach to making documentaries?

The topics that I have explored lend themselves to the visual and audio. In *Covered*, I examined heavily tattooed women and female tattoo artists. Tattoos are visual in themselves, and the sound of the tattoo machine is iconic in this film. My current project examines a BDSM dungeon, in which the visual of sexuality is present, along with the sounds of implements in the dungeon, as well as the sounds in the kitchen while they are cooking, which I will be interspersing, to disassociate the audience. Less obviously, I am using documentary film to explore student loan debt stories. Some have asked why this needs visual representation. But when I show them websites that collect text stories of participants, compared against my videos of people talking about their struggles, the answer is obvious—video humanizes the topic and creates characters to whom we can relate.

Can you provide criteria for “telling of a social science story?”

Sociologists emphasize a certain perspective on the world, which should come across in their films. Whereas psychologists or journalists can represent anything or anyone without such parameters, sociologists represent social structures, institutions, power, and inequality.

In your opinion, has sociology as a discipline missed the audiovisual turn? Why/why not? Is it catching up and making significant progress? How?

Yes, sociology has missed the audio/visual turn. Entrenched in traditional academic, sociologists persist in publishing in print journals and not incorporating aspects of public sociology, photography and documentary film. While there are definitely some individuals and organizations that promote visual sociology, they are few. The ultimate test is whether alternative methods of presentation are granted credit for tenure and promotion. The language in such guidelines always includes “peer reviewed academic journals and academic presses.” While audio/visual materials may be considered for promotion, they would never be considered *on their own*. Therefore, right there, we can see that these materials are not given equal weight, even when, as producers of such materials, we can definitely see the ways in which these products are equal (if not more) work, peer reviewed (film festivals, gallery show), and sociological, they cannot stand alone. Because I am motivated to do this work, I am willing to realize that I must do twice the amount of work, and make sure that I am meeting the minimum print requirements, and that the documentary films are additional, on top of that. While I produced the *Covered* documentary and screened it at festivals, it was not until I secured a book contract with NYU Press for *Covered Women* that I truly gained recognition from my academic peers.

Do you know of other sociology filmmaking classes? If so, where?

I don't really know of any.

Do you use basic sociological frameworks (symbolic interactionism, functionalism, conflict theory, etc) as references for students? Do these frameworks have use for audiovisual methods?

Yes, I use these theories in the classroom, but students have a hard time relating. Yes, these theories provide the big picture perspective to address the topic, and the approach for the topic and how it is visually represented.

Is sociological theory important to make films? If so, how and why? If not, why?

It is important, for our understanding of social issues, and if these issues are being representative.

What do you train your students to focus on while as they're actively in the field recording lived experiences? Interactions? Structure? Institutions? (it's a question about the process of preparation)

I don't have students do field work at this time.