

Interview with Douglas Harper, Ph.D. (Duquesne University)

I made a 16 mm film in 1985 that cost a great deal of money and made it into two festivals; it was a huge effort for what was accomplished (I had to sell my car to pay for it). Later I tried to fund an ethnographic film on railroad tramps (the subject of my first book) but all the humanities orgs I approached said they would not fund a film that would require illegal activity (riding freights). Given the expense and hassle of filmmaking I simply gave up and concentrated on writing and photography. Though I continued to teach about documentary filmmaking and to see them and think about it. I was discouraged by the "reality TV" phenomenon and have been less involved until recently.

Four years ago a small number of students and myself and another professor decided to enter the digital film world, to extend work we'd done on a local half way house for ex incarcerated junkies and alcoholics. I jumped at the opportunity and have become reasonably proficient at Final Cut Pro and filming with a modern video camera.

I would not say that the topic "demands" visual treatment; rather the visual treatment is different than an article or book would be. Because the film is concentrated on people speaking about their addictions it has to come alive filmmically with cutaways and other editing schemes.

Having said that it is very hard to make a film after you have been used to writing and photographing. A person can make a statement that is powerful and appropriate for the film but with the wrong inflection; not an inflection that stresses what one wants stressed, or that does not lower in volume at the end of the sentence. Thus it cannot be used. Editing film is thus much harder; it has to work as content and visual style. That's second nature to a film editor, but not to a writer. As I indicated I transcribe all footage and analyze it so I am not making a film that simply links sensational comments together.

The film makes a narrative out of disparate pieces of film. One quickly becomes aware that you cannot summarize with a film. When a person speaks, they are alone in their voice. That is both a limitation and a strength. As a sociologist I know that I've got to choose examples of people saying things that represent what I know about the culture I am filming. Thus I transcribe all film and do content analysis of the footage and design the film the way I would design an article or book; using the filmed spoken work and other elements to represent what was actually said or happened; not an outlier that might be more dramatic or powerful.

The film provides a gestalt that other forms of presentation do not. It is more than the separate elements. Creating a series of stories creates a powerful narrative structure. I often write in a narrative form (my first book, *Good Company*, is written as a novel) but filmed narrative is more powerful. Filming the spoken word allows a viewer to hear nuance, inflection, facial expression and other factors that influence how the words actually "say" what they communicate. The film records details of the setting; in this case, the halfway house, that would take volumes of words to record. The posters on the wall; the relative standards of order and cleanliness; the physical character of the house; all these become part of the film but would be very hard to describe adequately.