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Columbia College Chicago

Through the Looking-Glass: The Perpetuation of Homelessness Through  
Awareness Media

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Senior Capstone: Section 01

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Abstract:

The definition of who the homeless are has historically been defined by media. This project performs a genealogical analysis influenced by the work Foucault has done in *Madness and Civilization* to contextualize the way different forms of media through the years has constructed the homeless stereotype we live with today. By zeroing in on awareness media that is produced by independent documentarians, it becomes apparent the goal is not to educate on the systemic issue of homelessness, but more so to create an empathy-based connection between the subject and the viewer. This paper argues that an empathy-based production is not strong enough to

evoke actual change and furthermore, undermines its goal of creating awareness through the way it is produced. The underlying importance being, these productions are readily accessible on YouTube. A space that has been acclaimed as the new place to be in the media realm. This is the next step in the media timeline that defines homelessness. Empathy based productions ultimately misrepresent the homeless as a natural occurrence in society and lack a call to action. Therefore, allowing the timeline to continue uninterrupted and the homeless stereotype untouched, but reinforced.

**Keywords:** Homelessness, Awareness Media, Empathy, Independent Documentaries, Genealogy, Production

Homelessness is an issue that has taken our country by storm. You can find this growing phenomenon almost around every corner that you turn into, especially in big metropolitan centers. This topic has become so commonplace and an issue of grave concern for the entire country. So, how can such a prevalent issue still be growing as rapidly as it is? The conversation of homelessness is skewed disproportionately. When talking about this issue, we default into the generally passive “so sad to see” kinds of conversation, without digging deeper into its hidden social origins and causes. The US economy is designed in a way that makes it hard for poor to rise above the poverty line once they hit it. That has nothing to do with the individuals themselves, but everything to do with the way our society and political economy is organized. In the contemporary era of new media, there has been a rise of awareness media, specifically in the category of independent documentaries. Independent documentaries are readily available to any and every consumer with a quick YouTube search, and oftentimes, these videos are very short and easy to consume. Short documentaries are appealing to audiences because they can be

consumed rapidly. They are generally short and ‘get straight to the point.’ Every piece of information has to be picked precisely so the creator can convey their message as strongly as possible. But, with this rises an arsenal of issues. What is the most powerful route to take to not only raise awareness, but also call the viewer to action? How do you cause the viewer to take this information into everyday life and into every conversation they have on the issue? What will make the media you produce stick in the viewers’ head and cause a discomfort so deep they NEED to see the current situation change?

I’m raising these questions on the topic of homelessness because the latter has the potential to affect us all. The potential for homelessness looms in every person's future, if we aren’t afraid for the people experiencing it now, we should be afraid for ourselves. No one knows for sure that if they will ever be in this position; our future is unknown. But, why is homeless still not a serious issue on our radar in the political and public spheres? My thesis will examine independent YouTube documentaries aimed to raise awareness about the issue of homelessness. I am breaking down why this extremely niche category is so influential, the history behind the creation of the stereotype of homelessness, and address the perpetuation of it through media created with the purpose to benefit. I plan to intervene and raise awareness where the media I am discussing has fallen short. I am providing a call to action and breaking the ground so we can no longer sit as bystanders. Without doing this, we will continue to be passive and no real change will ever materialize.

Coming to Chicago four years ago from rural Nebraska, was the first time I had ever encountered homelessness face to face. Seeing this issue up close and in a personal way was so incredibly jarring. I found myself always giving away whatever small amount of money I happened to have in my pockets but also wondering how everyone could walk past these people without even a

concerned look. As I continued to live here, I became desensitized. I became exactly like those people. I was absorbed in getting where I was going and being on my phone instead of continuing to take notice of these people and their situations. When I was finally able to take a step back and realize what had happened my heart broke. In the sadness and anger I had felt I became extremely passionate about discovering why homelessness exists and why these people have become so easily overlooked. Why do we have the ability to be desensitized to seeing fellow human beings live on the streets? And how can we dehumanize someone when we are looking them right in the eye?

To educate myself, I started my journey looking into the world of YouTube documentaries that spoke directly to homelessness and homeless people. I learned so many stories of how people ended up homeless, but also why they have continued to stay in that situation. While doing this, my eyes were opened to the stereotype of who the homeless are. Society tells us that homeless people are the bottom of the totem pole. These are people that have not worked hard enough or have the wrong priorities or got caught up in drugs, alcohol, or gambling. While this may be in some cases, it does not apply to all homeless people. Most homeless people are mentally ill or were struck by a financial hardship that they were unable to overcome. These are often people that had average lives and ended up in this situation because of a political economic system that produces extreme poverty and homelessness. But, this is not at all what we are taught about the homeless and homelessness.

As I continued researching, I looked into the safeguards in place to help individuals in this position. There are very few and the list keeps getting smaller. These are things like affordable housing, welfare, and help for the mentally ill. These things are virtually unattainable to many among the homeless; only a few are able to ever actually benefit from these programs. The only

hope for the homeless are shelters and charity organizations, which are problematic as well. It became very clear to me that the issue of homelessness, although it will more than likely always exist, could be dramatically reduced if there were more attainable low-income options and opportunities.

My thesis draws heavily on the work Michel Foucault has done on genealogy. Foucault uses genealogy to study the history of how social structures that have been normalized for us are formed. He believes that by doing genealogical studies you can shatter the current structure in place and address the actual individual being affected by them. Foucault's work helps me address the history of the creation of what we know homelessness as today and look beyond what we have been programmed to believe. In conjunction with this, I use Stuart Hall's work on encoding/decoding to critique and interrogate dominant modes of awareness media. I embark on a semiotic analysis that breaks down the production of two sample documentaries, *Homeless in Chicago* by Bryan Urbanack and *Homeless in America* by Strange Archive, to address how the current stereotype of homelessness is perpetuated instead of being combatted.

In this day and age, media is so easily accessible and productions based on empathy rarely come into question. I believe it is extremely important to look at these empathy-based productions even closer to make sure they are accurately representing the community and the message they are sending is being communicated clearly and thoroughly as well to be sure the viewer is receiving the full, accurate picture. Otherwise, when this media does not come into question, misrepresentation is often missed. This is integral to making progress. If a message of misrepresentation is continuously recreated, time and time again this community will continue to be overlooked. For clarification, when I use the term misrepresentation, I am referring to the recreation of the homeless stereotype in a form of media that should instead be combating it. I

feel the point of awareness media is to create a bridge between structure and empathy. You should create the necessary empathetic connection between the subject and viewer, but not without also addressing the structure and larger social forces involved. Our unconscious minds are easily susceptible to power hierarchies. We fall into our place and don't notice it working on the people below our class unless we have made ourselves conscious to do so. It is easy to be sucked into the stereotype of homelessness, even when watching a gut-wrenching story being told by a homeless person. The slightest thing can trigger a programmed glimmer in the untrained eyes unconscious mind. This comes into play in many instances, most notable is when we walk past the homeless on the street without even making eye contact or offering up a smile. What is it in us that triggers that response? I have heard many testimonials from homeless individuals that have pinpointed this exact remark. It is often said that even if money cannot be given the kindness of a smile or an acknowledgement with your eyes, can provide just as much help.

If you were to conduct a census of the homeless individuals in the United States at any point in time, you would consistently find that there are 83,000 individuals who experience chronic homelessness. Individuals who experience chronic homelessness have been homeless for over a year and have a mental or physical condition that is debilitating. Beyond this there are up to 560,000 people homeless in the United States (Quinn 31). For the work I am doing in this project, I am using homeless as an all-encompassing term. I am choosing to define homeless not by home loss, but by the economic level homeless subjects are placed at in society. That is, this includes for me any person who is experiencing extreme hardship and cannot rise above it due to stipulations put in place by the government, including minimum income requirements, disability restrictions, lack of mailing address, etc. I think it's important to define this because there is a lot

of research work done on homelessness that centers solely around the lack of the home. But, in this project, I'm talking about the people who are at the economic level where it is difficult to even function. I believe where you sleep does not define whether you are homeless or not; it is where you're standing economically and the hardships that affect you physically, mentally, and economically.

### **Genealogical Analysis of Homelessness**

The work Foucault has done on genealogy has enabled a new way of looking at the world around us. We are told what something is and then that is the idea we have. We rarely question these things because we were told they are normal. However, Foucault believes doing a genealogical analysis you can provide a deeper context and call into question these seemingly normal ideas. By looking at how we believed things were in the past, we can adjust how we believe them to be now. Foucault is renowned for his genealogical analysis of the clinically insane. He provides a historical analysis of how we have created the stereotype of the mentally ill needing to be institutionalized in his book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. He explains that the mad were once thought of as wiser than the average person. They were allowed to continue living their lives normally and actually had more power than normal individuals because it was believed that they knew something that we did not. However, as time moves on this idea does a complete turn and we now believe that the mentally ill are dangerous people that need to be contained to preserve the safety of the citizens. Genealogical analysis uncovers discrimination against disenfranchised individuals. Historically when issues like homelessness and mental illness began emerging we still treated these individuals as humans with value. But, as time moves on that fades away and society becomes disgusted and starts seeing these individuals in a dehumanizing manner.



The word homeless did not always come with the stereotype that it has today. Today the stereotype of the homeless, that is most frequently associated with this issue, is that if you are homeless you are where you are in life because of a lack of desire to work, drug addiction, or misconduct of their own volition. In reality this is true to an extent, but it is not true for all cases. The way our current economic system is structured leaves virtually no room for anyone to rise above their volatile economic standing. Foucault says, “madness is the false punishment of a false solution, but by its own virtue it brings to light the real problem, which can then be truly resolved.” I believe this quote is saying that deeming someone as mad means the solution is institutionalization. America has a history of keeping what they deem as wrong out of sight and far away from “normal” citizens. We see this with segregation and the internment camps used against Japanese Americans during World War Two. This is the real problem I believe Foucault is referring to. We keep the “unsightly” out of sight and this is inherently wrong and cannot be continued to be tolerated. In the situation of homelessness instead of boxing up the homeless and keeping them out of sight, we have left them on the streets to be seen as the dunce of society. Residual propaganda of the American Dream around every corner to remind you that if you do not continue to work hard and provide for yourself that is where you will be. Letting this continue to be a reality is inhumane and it is crucial that this is changed.

To be able to truly understand what homelessness is, it is important to understand the history behind the word and know what homelessness was. I am addressing homelessness in my thesis in the present-day context, but understanding that this word hasn't always had the connotation we know it to currently have is pivotal in conveying my theory of misrepresentation. In *There's No Place Like Home: The Discursive Creation of Homelessness*, Celine-Marie Pascale performs a post-structuralist analysis of homelessness and contextualizes the role print media played within

the development of the connotation we now connect with the term homeless. She begins her article by taking us back to the 1980s. During this time the impoverished were separated into two categories, the old poor and the new poor. The old poor were referred to as those who were accustomed to life on the street or also known as ‘bums.’ The new poor were categorized as hardworking people who were in sticky situations due to a recent change in the economy (Pascale 253).

The new poor are the people who were originally connected to the term ‘homeless.’ During this time the word came with a connotation that implied a specific hardship placed on a person that was so overbearing they were unable to overcome it. Who the new poor is and what that means can be better explained by Pascale in this quote,

Single (White) men were reported to compose 85% of the estimated 1.2 million people without housing in 1983 and were referred to as “economic refugees who have found it impossible to get work or affordable housing” Overall, newspapers used homelessness as a term to characterize hard working people who lost their homes because of structural economic changes and were deserving of some new level of attention. The New York Times quoted Governor Cuomo as saying that he was committed to “giving the homeless the safe, clean shelter that is a basic human right (Pascale 253-254).

This is so crucial because the connotation to the word homeless and the eagerness to provide clean and safe shelters for homeless people has completely shifted. Homeless was used to describe respectable people which caused an urgency to make sure the institutions for them were in perfect order. This is not what we see in the world today. Historically, cities have been accustomed to the need of providing affordable housing. Flop houses which originated in the 1900s were created for the use of individuals who needed to the cheapest housing and as an

alternative to living in a shelter. By the 20th century these affordable housing options became obsolete. With cheap housing of course comes horrible conditions, these were not ideal places to stay by no means, but the point being, at the time city officials understood and prioritized having a housing option for every class.

In an article published by the New York Times on December 23, 1988 Ronald Reagan is quoted saying the homeless are just people that live on the streets. He goes on to connect the homeless to the issue of mental illness. He says the homeless are majority mentally ill people, which is in fact still true to this day, however he continues on to say they are people that were released from mental institutions because of lawsuits brought about by the American Civil Liberties Union. Reagan says the individuals that were released were walking away willingly and chose a life of freedom in a world that no longer had anything for them. Reagan continues to degrade the homeless by insisting that there are shelters in every city that the homeless have the ability to go to, yet they continue to sleep on grates and lawns. In this interview Reagan lacks compassion, but also any ability to take responsibility. There is way for him to see the role he has played in bringing a life of injustice to these people which also implies the inability to see that the systems in place to help them, such as shelters, are inadequate. Shelters only have a certain amount of beds, they often have infestations and are not a safe option, but above all shelters impose rules and regulations on the homeless as if they need to rehabilitate the homeless back into someone that fits into the bourgeoisie mold of society. As the interview continues Reagan covers all the bases on the issue, from shelters to jobs and everything in between. There is a coherency in his argument that he has done all there is to do for the homeless and those who still suffer are suffering due to their lack of interest in helping themselves (Roberts 26).

From 1988 on, homelessness takes on the shape we see it in now. The homeless population is mindlessly connected to being drug addicts, mentally ill, and suffering from alcoholism. and it is forgotten that while these are true characteristics of some of the homeless population, they are symptomatic of a population of people that have a deep history. A life before homelessness that often includes inequality, violence, and other factors that when left without resolution for years, can result in homelessness. It's forgotten that those who were homeless now were not necessarily always and have experienced a life that influences their current reality, just like people that are not affected by homelessness (Parsell 135). It is important to acknowledge that every individual is just that, an individual. It cannot be assumed that every individual will benefit from the same services. Like I stated in the beginning of my project, my definition of homeless includes those that have access to some form of home. Believing that shelters are the most important piece to ending homelessness disenfranchises every individual that needs help beyond shelter (Greer 130-152). The connotation of what homelessness is and who those people are has always been created by the people that are given the platform and power to speak on the topic of homelessness. Pascale raises an important point saying, "Individuals who have housing are called to comment on homelessness and the homeless based on their status as persons living in houses" (Pascale 261). That is to say, the information we receive is primarily from people who are not or have never experienced what it is to be homeless. This also implies that these are people of a high economic status because saying they are called to comment gives the words they speak validity. Because these individuals have a home and are a high economic standpoint, it is believed they are the best spokesperson for those that are without. This is a key contributing factor to the creation of the connotation to the word homeless because these are always individuals with some type of status. Furthermore, these are often people of high status such as

police and government officials. These individuals are in a position where they are constantly making decisions to protect the wellbeing of their citizens. What they say is held to a higher standard by the public because we are taught not to question these people, they have what's best for us in mind. However, a false rhetoric of who the homeless are was replicated continuously in the media through years to come leaving us with the prevalent stereotype that we have today.

The use of public officials to educate the public on homelessness is seen frequently not only in past news articles, but also in documentaries being created today. This false rhetoric is still being replicated today intentionally or not, but I often see documentaries using personal testimonies from homeless people and after they offer up an impactful saying a testament from a police officers or government official on the same issue is spliced in between. Even though today we are much quicker to question anything we hear, when this occurs it creates these two opposing sides where it looks as though, the homeless people are in the wrong.

The overarching issue that Pascale says is the topic of these newspaper articles is that it is often insisted that homeless people took or are taking part in horrible behavior that inherently made life more difficult for people with homes (Pascale 256). During this time, the only source of news was what you read in newspapers and no one was taught that they should question everything they read, even if they have no doubt what they read is true. Beyond just speaking about the supposed horrible behavior of the homeless, to keep this issue under control they started putting laws into place that would counteract the 'horrible behavior' of the homeless.

Taking this issue out of the media and into the real world. Now what was once an issue people were just reading about in the papers has become tangible. Action is being taken and the public has something legitimate to back up their claims. Ultimately, this constructed a deep cultural rift that flipped the rhetoric of what homelessness is. Before 1988 homelessness was an issue of the

economy. It was common knowledge that if you were homeless it was because you were affected by an economic hardship you could not overcome, people wanted to help each other. But after the release of these articles, homelessness is shifted and seen as an issue with the human themselves. These people are now seen as if they have done this to themselves and have no intent to do better for themselves, they are no longer respectable people in need of assistance. However, that is truly what it is, an economic issue where they have no ability to make steps forward because of the circumstances put into place by the government, they are respectable people that need assistance. It is clear that media has a powerful role in shifting the ideals of people. It is more important than ever to be extremely diligent when constructing media in this day and age. The littlest shift can create a giant ripple effect.

### **The Role of New Media/Documentary Filmmaking on the Consumer**

Documentary filmmaking is a genre of filmmaking that is unlike any other. Instead of portraying a story, documentaries are portraying real situations. There is a code of ethics in place that needs to be upheld. *Documentary Filmmaking and Ethics: Concepts, Responsibilities, and the Need for Empirical Research* by Willemien Sanders discusses the topic of documentary filmmaking and how ethics and morals come into play to affect the final product, the film. Willemien goes through a variety of examples in which participants in documentary films have reported that their input was taken out of context, either by chopping up what they had to say or placing their portion in a part of the film that lets that audience insinuate things that may not be true. He deciphers what he believes ethics and morals to be. In documentary filmmaking he believes ethics to be the principles in place to inform you on the appropriate way to be a documentary filmmaker. Morals on the other hand, are more personal and deal with how the filmmaker deals with right and wrong. A component that sticks out strongly to me is that he says, to be a

documentary filmmaker you must remember the role you play in the influence of what documentary filmmaking is seen as (Willemien 531). So, if a person develops a horrible reputation for cutting and pasting their films together in whichever way they choose, that projects the idea that documentary films are not explaining reality, but really just the reality that the filmmaker wants you to believe and it tarnishes the validity of documentary filmmaking.

Independent filmmaking faces an obstacle that production companies do not face. This obstacle is money. Independent filmmakers are on a much tighter budget to produce their film. Which in turn means they must cut back on what they plan to do creatively. This makes for films with a lower level of production making every single production choice they do make absolutely crucial to the storyline of the film. This is also true for independent documentaries. Every production choice is integral to making sure the documentarian's point is made (Berra 127-129).

I believe there is the issue of power in YouTube that is unlike any other media power we currently have. Any user has the capability of uploading content to YouTube and this content can be shared quite easily. YouTube is a search engine in video form. You can search for whatever has peaked your interest and you are guaranteed to find at least one video on the subject. These videos can vary in length, but I think what the most appealing part about YouTube is, is that you have the ability to educate yourself on issues rather quickly. The YouTube videos that I have found to gain the most traction is usually quite short in length. The consumer is able to ingest multiple videos at any given point in time. We are living in an era where media has never been more accessible.

This is key component in the work that I have done because due to the accessibility and quick digestibility. YouTube videos that means the information that is jam packed into them is so crucial. Awareness media has an end goal of simply bringing awareness. People who produce

this media want their viewers to walk away remembering all of the important information they put into what they produced. If that goal is not achieved than they haven't been able to raise awareness and eventually enact change. I watched a multitude of independent YouTube documentaries on the issue of homelessness to begin my research for this project. I noticed one vital trend that I believe is what prevents this media from being awareness media. Every documentary focuses in on creating empathy between the viewer and the subject. The filmmakers are focused solely on showing the viewers the information that is sad to see. The story of how the people on the streets got to where they are. They ride on the coattails of sadness, but that simply is not enough. Media that relies on sadness to create change effects viewers for only a short amount of time. The missing piece to this puzzle is the hard to see. It is easy to see homelessness and receive a sad emotion, but it is not easy to understand why this is such a prevalent and growing issue in our country. Filmmakers cannot focus solely on empathy, it is necessary to spark feelings that are much deeper and more passionate. We need to be addressing the economic system in place that is currently holding these individuals down.

### **Documentary Analysis**

I have chosen two documentaries that I believe exemplify the points and claims I am making. They provide a strong empathetic connect between the subject and the viewer, but do not provide a critique of the systemic issue at hand. I think they approach the issue from two different angles. These two angles being the hyper realistic or a phantasmagorical mashup of the two. They either lean heavily into the raw, realistic version or they over-produce and make an almost fantasy film about the representation of homelessness. They both have their merits and limitations, but I believe the limitations carry so much deep context that they outweigh the merits by tenfold. *Homelessness in Chicago* by Bryan Urbanek focuses on homelessness in Chicago and provides a



hyper realistic approach to the production of their documentary, *Homelessness in America* by Strange Archive opens the floor to a much wider territory being the entire United States this documentary leans heavily into a phantasmagorical mashup. These two angles do not only mold and skew the story line of their production, but also the story line for the actual systemic issue of homelessness.

*Homelessness in Chicago* follows the producer Bryan Urbanek as he ventures to Chicago from his rural town of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He begins his documentary by giving a short synopsis of why he is creating this production. Bryan believes homelessness is a prevalent issue in the United States and wants to start a conversation about the normalized dehumanization of the homeless. He opens up in a moment of self-reflexivity where he discusses that even he is one of the people that often walks by and disregards the homeless without a blink of an eye. There is a moment where he makes clear that his intentions with this project are not to reveal how the homeless in Chicago live their lives and survive, he came to learn the backstories, what their lives were like before homelessness, and ultimately how they feel about being homeless. In the first moments of his documentary, Bryan makes some deep connections with the viewer. He brings up the point that the majority of the people he sees will walk past the homeless without a question. This therefore calls into question all applicable viewers. It causes you to look inward for a moment and ask yourself if that is something you do and if the answer is yes, you have to search even further into yourself to discover why that is true. Right after he makes this claim he brings up the question of how we would feel if we were homeless. How many of us have never experienced what it feels like to not know where we are going to sleep at night and he digs in even deeper when he brings up that many homeless people do not remember the last time they slept in a bed, let alone somewhere warm. By doing this he has already created an empathetic

connection between the viewer and the subject. You are already feeling an eerie feeling from your actions and your position in the situation at hand and he uses this to enhance the importance of remembering that the homeless are people too that once lived normal lives. I believe this is one of the most renowned merits of his production. Bryan is relying on empathy to carry his argument through to the conversations in the real world and this tactic is important in doing so, however although it is powerful, I do not believe it is a reliable method of raising awareness.

As you get deeper into the documentary, the second person Bryan speaks to is a man named Bob, he sits in a wheelchair under the El and tells Bryan the story of his life. We learn his father murdered his mother and step mother when he was a child as well as raping three of his sisters. His father gave him his first drugs at ten and his life has been a downhill slide ever since. The production of this documentary is extremely hyper realistic. There is no background music and the way the shots are laid out are almost laid out as if to enhance the intense feelings that the subject has experienced. For example, as Bob tells his story the video moves in slow motion. As if Bryan and his team are trying to convey to the audience that Bob has experienced an entire life in slow motion. A life where it takes a great deal of time and effort to get to each new step.

As this is a production based on portraying a raw reality, every word spoken and every specific camera angle and production choice is so important. Bryan interviews each homeless person, but also provides a voice over to deepen the context of the situation. Immediately after Bob tells Bryan the gut-wrenching story of his childhood, the documentary cuts to a close up of his face and Bryan providing a voice over saying that even though Bob experienced a rocky past, he was still able to accomplish some good things. However, the sentence did not stop there. He undercuts the good Bob was able to accomplish by including that it was accomplished only when he was not shooting up heroine. If you keep this in mind as they conclude his interview, you

realize including this statement had nothing to do with the important story of Bob's life that they were conveying to the audience. This is where I began seeing the engrained stereotype of the homeless start shining through. It is so frequently forgotten that the homeless are as human as we are. We as humans often take part in drinking, smoking, and at some point other illegal activities. It is one of the most unifying qualities because every individual can relate to this experience. However, because the idea of homelessness was molded into the shape of a human that overused these vices and has no desire to work, we do not allow the homeless to acknowledge the use of these vices while in their situation. This statement is not to be mistaken as an endorsement for the use of heroin or other illegal drugs. It is a statement pointing out one of the clearest traits of dehumanization. We use vices to let out steam and let loose. Being dehumanized is to be denied of human qualities. Pushing forth a rhetoric that clearly denounces the horrible environment this group of people is forced to live in becomes hypocritical the moment you denounce an inherent component of being human. As in looking down upon an individual who is homeless for once experiencing drugs and alcohol or for still taking part in these activities. Especially after trying to convey the tragic story of the life of the individual in question. My statement is slightly out of context in this situation, but still has weight in the matter because Bryan makes it clear in the beginning of his documentary that he is creating this production to break down the wall of dehumanization, he wants people to recognize that these individuals are people with sad backstories and are not on the streets for the reasons we are told to believe. But, then after portraying a tragic story beautifully he undercuts its entirety with a statement that reinforces the common idea of who the homeless person is.

Like in the beginning of the documentary, a key portion of the way Bryan plans to make his mark is by visually demonstrating and conveying the message to the viewer that they should be

feeling something. After speaking to Bob, Bryan goes to Subway and emphasizes that he is starving. The contrast of the video is kicked up quite high and you see that Bryan is about to have a euphoric experience as he takes the first bite of his sandwich after a long, hot day. But, suddenly as he is about to take the first bite, the contrast levels back out to normal and he explains that he can't eat because he is so moved by what the homeless individuals he has spoken to have to endure. Bryan is continuously subjecting his viewers to an inner questioning. He represents what you should be feeling hearing these stories which makes you question why if you are not.

The last person Bryan speaks to is a man named Walter. Walter had cancer and has been homeless for eight years due to the necessity, but inability to pay for his cancer treatments. He speaks about the injustices that have been done to him by the people of Chicago since being homeless which include being punched and being poisoned. Bryan makes it clear that he has made the deepest connection with Walter. You see a montage of signs that are held by homeless people as Bryan says that Walter's sign is not asking for money or help, it simply says God bless. The rest of the conversation with Walter focuses on his commitment to God and how he has dedicated his life to living through God. He finds his happiness in the bible and with that he is content.

The deeper connection with Walter's story comes in the scene following Bryan and his interaction. As Bryan drives home he has a heart to heart with the camera where he breaks down the most key moment from his day. The cameraman is sitting in the passenger seat and it makes you feel as though it is just you and Bryan driving down the road and having a thought-provoking conversation. As he remembers back to the day that he had, the moment that stuck out to him in his mind was of Walter. He mentions that every person he talked to asked him if he

was going to give them money or by them lunch. He goes as far to say they were concerned about whether he was going to or not. Then, he says with Walter he completely forgot to give him money and didn't even remember that he forgot until half an hour later. The way these two sentences are phrased paint two very different pictures of homelessness. You have Bob and the other individuals who spoke with Bryan, but it was more transactional. They told him their story, he gave them lunch or something in return. With Walter, Bryan was so caught up in the conversation he was able to walk away from him without remembering to do either. This is where I see all the influential work Bryan has done fall to pieces. He focuses in on Walter and how when he went back to give him money he did not want to take it because he felt so ashamed that he had wondered why Bryan would talk to him and film his story and then leave him with nothing, that he did not want to accept the money when Bryan came back. He eventually does accept it. But, Walter is held to a much different standard than the rest of the homeless men are. You never hear how he became homeless, only about his dying devotion to God. I believe this is where the influential work Bryan has done falls to pieces because he creates a hierarchy among the homeless. His bias shines through clearly. Watching it through more than once you see many moments where he slides in many aspects that lessen the struggle of the homeless. With Bob he includes a clip of him being handed a wad of cash and says before he left a woman gave him an entire deep-dish pizza. Throughout the documentary Bryan attempts to assert a certain kind of control over the viewers. From the beginning when he calls every person into question about their dehumanizing tendencies to the middle where he shows the deep empathetic response the viewer should be feeling. He created a production that is portraying reality in a very raw way. When he creates this hierarchy, it is as though he is no longer combating the stereotype of

homelessness, but shifting it to include a hierarchy. So, now the viewer knows what types of people they should keep their eyes open to and which they can continue to walk past.

Creating an empathy-based production cannot successfully bring awareness to homelessness unless you address why these individuals you are interviewing are continuously unable to stand on their own two feet. Bryan leaned into empathy and created a production that exemplified the raw reality of what it is to be homeless, but as he tried to make the empathic connection strong enough, he created another media source towards the perpetuation of the issue. In the beginning of the documentary it is mentioned rather quickly that the amount of homeless people in Chicago is twice the amount of people that reside in Bryan's hometown of Oshkosh. It is necessary to understand that Bryan is coming from a place where the living environment is a stark difference to Chicago. He does not experience homelessness in the entirety of what it is in Chicago on a daily basis. Meaning he is addressing the issue with a framework of knowledge that lacks the knowledge of what it is to live in a vastly urban area. What I see as the greatest downfall of his documentary is the exclusion of his bias or the conscious recognition that his own bias is often coming into play in his documentary. A hierarchy within an impoverished community is created in his work and when it was not taken notice of it was able to be put out for consumption and ultimately, eventually reproduction in an unknown magnitude.

*Homelessness in America* by Strange Archive takes a much different approach. The documentary opens with the credits rolling and dark, ominous music playing loudly in the background. They are setting an eerie tone to begin with, so going into it you already know that what you are about to see is going to be something that pulls at your emotions. I believe what they have done in this documentary is very thorough and provides a lot of powerful information. However, you still see a bias from the production team come through, although much different from the previous

documentary. A key component in this documentary is the use of the homeless, but also post production. These two details along with the bias that can be seen far outweigh the merits of this documentary and exemplify the point I am arguing that independent YouTube documentaries on homelessness are not providing an accurate critique of the systemic issue and are not bringing about proper awareness which can ultimately not cause change.

I will first address the careful use of the homeless. There is a clear pattern in the homeless people that were chosen to speak in this documentary. They all fit into the category of a character. Each person possesses a specific quality that grabs the viewers' attention and commands the screen. This is a powerful tactic to utilize because now not only are the viewers able to connect with the homeless through empathy because of their backstories, but also connect with them based on a connect they feel with who they are. These character esc people are picked with a clear plan in mind, they possess a quality that draws people in. Viewers can connect to them because they learn their personalities and they no longer feel like just a person on a screen, they feel like someone they know. However, in this documentary the selective process is much more thorough. Few of the homeless get to actually share their backstories and they are always the ones who are the most notable characters. This includes an ex-wife of a former Lakers player and a teenage girl who was kicked out of her home because she was bringing another homeless teen home to stay at her house. The rest of the people we hear from in the documentary, with the exception of a few, you never hear their backstory as to how they became homeless. The approach the documentarian and the production team take it's still the empathy fueled approach, but they focus on testimonies of the life these individuals have experienced since becoming homeless. I cannot say which approach is more successful, the backstory approach or the testimonies of life as a homeless person. They both possess qualities that generate a strong

empathetic response from viewers, but it is not a solid enough argument. The gut-wrenching stories we hear from these individuals causes us to have an outwardly reaction for a moment in time, such as the loss of an appetite, but this does not last. Soon enough you will be back to your normal schedule except now you may think twice before walking past the homeless on the street. This point carries me into my next observation, the clear bias being pulled through the documentary and the way the documentary is produced We hear many homeless individuals talk about what their life entails. Including sleeping arrangements, the way they acquire food, their mental health, and even their experience with violence. This documentary provides a clear stance in support of homeless shelters, their point is portrayed so strongly that you can see it start to call into question the homeless people who do not utilize shelters. They start to make this stance clear rather close to the beginning of their piece and they carry it through until the end. After we have heard a number of testimonies from the homeless, the documentary cuts to the president of a homeless shelter. Immediately as this happens the music shifts from ominous and dark to light and hopeful. The president makes many statements about the logistics of the shelter, such as the number of beds and how many are available for the day to day needs of the homeless. He says two thirds of the beds are reserved daily for people involved in programs with the shelter which leaves only one third of the scarcely few amounts of beds for the walk-in individuals every night. Furthermore, each person is only allowed to stay for five days in a row due to the fact the president doesn't want them, "feeling like it is a hotel." In the portions with the president he often makes large generalizations. One in particular that caught my attention is when he claims that the individuals that do not utilize the shelters are individuals who have no desire to work to get out of homelessness. The documentarian and the post production teams' actions get called into action at this point because immediately following this statement they cut to a homeless man



stating he is just fine on the street and then again to a police officer stating sidewalks are public property and it is illegal for any person to establish any form of residency on them. The way this is played out in the cut and paste format insinuates the homeless that are not using the shelter fall directly into the stereotype the documentary is trying to combat. This portrays an idea that the shelter is the one and only saving grace for homeless people, when in reality even the simplest research into the topic of homelessness will tell you that shelters are not a preferred method of housing for the homeless because of a plethora of reasons which include, but are not limited to, violence, bug infestations, and lack of safety.

*Homeless in America* creates a story out of a very serious issue. Instead of conveying a rhetoric that shows the raw and realistic truth of the homeless crisis in America, it is portrayed as a fantasy like film where there are characters, a conflict, and a saving grace resolution. This distorts the fact that this is not a storyline in a film, it is a real systemic issue in this country and it is not a linear progression like it is explained. There were many systemic issues with homelessness addressed in the film, however they were only addressed by the homeless. This is a beautiful and compelling strategy, but all authority was taken from these individuals as the documentary perpetuated the stereotype and denounced the homeless that do not utilize shelters. Without that authority ultimately, even though what needs to be said to bring awareness is being said, the points do not land because the documentary is telling us who these people are and it isn't someone that should be listened to.

### **Conclusions**

The two examples I have provided are different in a variety of ways. One focuses in on a single location while the other speaks on the issue more broadly. Both rely on the power of empathy to raise awareness effectively and use different methods of storytelling to convey their message.

These two examples set as the book ends of a very broad spectrum. There are many pieces of media in this category that fall somewhere in the middle, but ultimately land in the group of empathy driven awareness media. Analyzing both the raw and the overproduced are crucial to understanding this issue because they shape the way we think about this systemic issue and ultimately have the power to contradict each other and in doing so further complicate their message. When looking at *Homelessness in Chicago* by Bryan Urbanek it is seen as a glimpse into what is happening at ground level in Chicago. If you were to travel there tomorrow, the picture of homelessness Bryan painted is what you would expect to see. Although I only focused on the limitations of this documentary, there were some merits to the film as well. I found these lying with the smaller interview segments. Bryan talked to a number of homeless people that day, but ultimately the way he constructed his message was by contrasting the two individuals Walter and Bob and creating a hierarchy among the homeless. This storyline outshines the smaller interviews in the middle that were actually providing solid information on the actual struggle the homeless in Chicago are living day to day. Many talked about how hard it is to get warm clothes, sometimes they will live months in the cold Chicago winter before ever getting a piece of heavy clothing. Bryan included the stories of individuals who were unable to talk because they were rushing to lines at food pantries to make sure they would get some source of nutrition that day. These stories started speaking about the actual hardship of being homeless, however when Bryan declared that his mission was to learn who the people are and not how they live, it constructed a product that became naturalized. Now Bryan is constructing a study of a culture of people that are accustomed to living on the street as if they were destined to live this life. He takes that struggle away and lessens that empathetic connection in the process. Rendering his production as ultimately not strong enough to make any actual cultural change, but

instead another production to reinforce the rhetoric society already believes is true, the homeless are homeless because they have chosen that life.

Flipping to the other end of the spectrum, *Homeless in America* is now portraying an image of what homelessness supposedly looks like in the entire country. As opposed to *Homelessness in Chicago* where you are looking with a microscope at one place, now you are looking at the entirety of a country. The documentarians again are not advocating for change. They are generalizing the struggle and advocating for systems that most homeless are adamantly fighting against. Such as homeless shelters and laws put into place to disenfranchise them. When tied to the word America it is believed that whatever is being shown is an accurate depiction of what is happening across the country. By advocating for institutions that the homeless are directly advocating against, you have created a product that devalues the mind and body of the homeless and directly contradicts what they are fighting for. The homeless will never be able to receive appropriate accommodations if the media circulating around the topic is insinuating that the provisions in place are adequate and the homeless are choosing not to take advantage of them. Also, if the production was staying true to its title and this is what homelessness looks like across the country it puts all other media aimed at awareness on this issue in a direct juxtaposition. Not providing a clear and cohesive message blurs the lines of what the viewer is supposed to feel and makes an empathy driven reaction unreliable.

Media has always played a key role in shaping the definition of who the homeless are. The media has always gotten to choose the story of the homeless that gets told, which has historically left out the actual struggles they face that they have no control over. The documentaries centered on telling the stories of who these people were before they became homeless are documentaries centered on finding an excuse or a way to blame these individuals for the position they are in.

This is put in the box of empathy. The documentarian frames these stories in a way that implies that the viewer should feel empathetic for the subject, but the framework beyond the stories provide a conscious message that aligns directly with those who believe the homeless are just the bottom of the totem pole. These are ideals that believe they should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The small empathetic connect is not strong enough to carry over into actual change. As times keep changing, the importance of using media spaces with intention is becoming even more salient. YouTube has begun to be regarded as “the place to be” in the media realm. It is the edgy version of television and is commanding an audience of all ages. The great fault in media is that the majority of viewers take what they see at face value, they believe it with no question. If there is not media produced that brings awareness to the true issue at hand, the lack of adequate systems to help the homeless rise above, it will go unknown that they are held at this level of distress because our economy makes it that way. If no one knows, nothing will be done. What needs to be done to evoke actual change is to create media that questions the class hierarchy. Media that examines why a class system even exists and why the poorest people have never known what it is to not be poor. But, the most crucial point is that this has to be done with empathy. We must create a deep, unwavering, empathetic connection and let it be known that every day that passes that we are not working towards change, we intensify the struggle for the homeless.

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