Gentry, Nicholas. The Social Semiotics of Tattoos.

Research Proposal

The goal of my project is to explore the relationship between tattoos and social semiotics. I'm interested in the modality of tattoos (i.e. their function as visual means of communication) and the classification of tattoos into various sign types (e.g. icons, indexes, symbols, writing, maps, etc.) I was inspired by Enid Schildkrout’s research on ritual scarification and traditional tattooing and her definition of “the visible surface of the body as the interface between the individual and society.” (Schildkrout 2004: 319) I want to look at the intended meaning of tattoos (and/or how the “owner” derives meaning from their tattoo) and the ways in which different people can create different meanings for the same tattoo. I will also be paying attention to the location of the tattoos on the body, and how tattoo visibility may affect how people interpret tattoos as social signs.

I plan to record a number of short informal interviews (will you ask the same questions of all interviewees? might help to keep the video focused; you could still include idiosyncratic information from your informants) with people in which I’ll ask them to talk about the meaning of their tattoo(s) and the ways in which other people typically interpret their tattoo(s). I want to encourage interviewees to describe their tattoos and their meanings in their own words, as Karl Heider states that, “it is in the realm of the critical anecdote, or the illustrative case, that film most often serves ethnography.” (Heider 1976: 88) I hope that by recording these interviews, I will also be able to capture and analyze the way that people present their tattoo(s) to others (pointing to certain parts as they explain, gesturing, moving an article of clothing to make the tattoo more visible, etc.)

Proposal is about 250 words: yes no

Proposal outlines the goals of the project: strong good adequate needs work

Proposal outlines the methods of the project: strong good adequate needs work

Reference to course readings: strong good adequate needs work

Reference to scholarly/peer-reviewed anthropological works: strong good adequate needs work

Works Cited

Heider, Karl R.
1976 Chapter 3: Attributes of Ethnographic Film, pp. 46-117 University of Texas Press, Austin.

Schildkrout, Enid

Final Video

Scholarly Background

For this project, I wanted to try to document examples of how, as Enid Schildkrout (2003:321) defines it, “the tattooed skin negotiates between the individual and society and between different social groups” (Schildkrout 2004:321). To get started with this project, I worked with my friend to take pictures of five of her tattoos that I would show to volunteers. To provide background context for analyses of participants’ reactions to the tattoos, I categorized each tattoo as one of the three Peircean sign types (cite a source or use a link to explain Peirce's semiotics).

I made sure that there was at least one tattoo to represent each of the Peircean sign types (cite a source or use a link to explain Peirce's semiotics). Overall I presented volunteers with 2 iconic tattoos, 1 indexical tattoo, and 2 symbolic tattoos. Matt Rossano (2010:S89) makes a good argument in his article on symbolism, however, that “while these levels of reference are distinguishable, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A sign can sometimes overlap levels of reference” (Rossano 2010:S89). With that in mind, I wasn’t set on each of these distinctions, I just used them for reference. I also ordered the tattoos so that the first one was the most iconic and the last the most symbolic.

All six of the individuals that I interviewed had met and interacted with my friend on a number of occasions. I specifically did not disclose to the volunteers that all of the tattoos belonged to my friend, as I wanted to record their attempts at interpreting symbols without the necessary context. Knowledge of my friend’s personality and general interests would have affected the volunteers’ interpretations, as they might have filtered their initial interpretations to try and fit them within the perceived context. Matt Rossano explains that “an even more important determinant for a symbol’s referent is the complex relationship the symbol has to other symbols in the context of its use” (Rossano 2010:S90) keep citations and mention of author together. Knowing that all five tattoos belonged to my friend would have also provided some additional context to the volunteers in that they would likely see the tattoos as related to each other, thus using previous interpretations to help make sense of more symbolic images.
I was inspired by the 1990 film “Nanook Revisited” and also wanted to include an element of reflexivity and meta-analysis into the film by asking that my friend watch the volunteers’ interpretations and provide her own reactions. I chose not to include myself in the video (aside from including an audio recording of me providing a participant with directions) because I wanted the volunteers to literally speak for themselves. The only instructions that I gave to the participants was to click through the slideshow of tattoo photos that I had made and to provide their initial reactions. I gave my friend the same directions for her reaction video, but she was already aware that she would be watching videos of people providing interpretations of her tattoos.

I think the addition of my friend’s reactions really helped to demonstrate the idea of tattoos as interpretable signs, as my friend regarded the volunteers’ interpretations as possible alternate meanings rather than incorrect assumptions. As expected, when the volunteers were shown tattoos that were increasingly symbolic in nature, their confidence levels in their interpretations began to decrease. Without the contextual background required to accurately interpret the symbols, the participants attempted to interpret all of the tattoos as if they were iconic or indexical. Good point! An interesting and unexpected phenomenon I noted was that the participants typically offered a wider variety of interpretations for iconic images, interpreting them as if they were more symbolic. This concept is explained very well by Marquis Bey, who talks about how tattoos “shift in meaning, contrary to popular belief that tattoos are ‘permanent’, in that they signify different meanings simultaneously” (Bey 2015:76). It was interesting to me how willing my friend was to accept the participants’ interpretations rather than reject them, and how she tried to provide alternative context to help make the volunteers’ interpretations work.

Overall, I didn’t want to add too much of my own interpretations in my video. I wanted to keep the focus on what the volunteers were saying and how my friend was reacting. Regardless, by virtue of editing the video, the participants’ reactions that I recorded were filtered through me before it got to the viewers, but I focused on keeping as much reaction and interpretation as I could while keeping the video within the time limit.

3 days late

References Cited

Bey, Marquis
2015 epistemology of ink: an unholy trinity; or, atheism, feminism and Blackness. Feminist Review 110(1): 75–78

Rossano, Matt J.

Schildkrout, Enid

Approximately 900 words

Yes  no

Provides basic background information for the issues

Outstanding  Strong  Good  Adequate  Weak

Substantial list of scholarly and peer-reviewed References Cited listed

Outstanding  Strong  Good  Adequate  Weak

Includes brief discussion of why you chose the format of your video (e.g., narrated or non-narrated, etc) in relation to the course readings.

Outstanding  Strong  Good  Adequate  Weak

Makes reference to any of the films we watched that inspired your approach to the film. If so, why?

Yes  no

The final wiki space is in past tense

Yes  no

References in American Antiquity format.

Yes  no  minor problems

Writing style

Outstanding  Strong  Good  Adequate  Weak

Reflection
I was very happy with how my video turned out in terms of the editing, content, and overall quality. When I started making it, I was only going to include footage from the volunteers reacting to the tattoos, but at nearly the last minute I had the idea to include the footage of my friend as well. I think that decision was ultimately what solidified the video together and gave the whole project much more of a reflexive feeling. I felt like the addition of that footage helped to encourage viewers to consider their own interpretations and compare them to the actual meanings that my friend talked about. If I hadn’t included the clips where my friend explained what each of the tattoos actually meant, viewers would have been left unsure of what the “correct” answer was to the question. The biggest issue was deciding how much of the wiki space to dedicate to analysis of the video versus explanation into the theoretical background. In retrospect, I wish that I had used more of the wiki space to talk about the theoretical background. I was hesitant to dive too deep into the theories of semiotics and chose instead to focus on the methodology behind filming the video, and as a result it feels as though the video and the wiki space do not have a sturdy enough connection to semiotics. Heider talked about ethnographic film in relation to a more traditionally scientific approach to data collections, pointing out that “results are only as sound as the methodology which produces them” (Heider 1976:11). I was so concerned with making my methods as transparent as possible to highlight how I was attempting to avoid bias that I didn’t end up actually providing substantial analyses of the data I collected. I neglected to consider how “ethnographic understanding emerges from the analysis, and an ethnography is only as good as the analysis” (Heider 1976:10). In order to provide meaningful analyses, I would have had to include more semiotic background to tie everything together. I agree.

Works Cited

Heider, Karl R.
1976  Chapter 1: Introduction, pp. 3-15 University of Texas Press, Austin.

Written Reflection on Final Video Rubric (see syllabus p 3-4)

Evaluates your video in relation to your written wiki space and the course readings, with explicit references to both.

Outstanding  Strong  Adequate  Weak

Discusses choices you made about the style of the video and evaluates how successful were they in conveying the subject matter.

Outstanding  Strong  Adequate  Weak

Discusses how well the video worked in comparison to the written component?

Outstanding  Strong  Adequate  Weak

Explicitly reference the course readings (and other resources if you wish).

Outstanding  Strong  Adequate  Weak

Entry is in past tense.

Yes  No