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Exploring Visual Sociology and the Sociology of the Visual Arts: Introduction and Selected Bibliography

Michael R. Hill

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

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Michael R. Hill

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EXPLORING VISUAL SOCIOLOGY AND

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INTRODUCTION AND SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

by

Michael R. Hill
Department of Sociology
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska

INTRODUCTION

Visual studies in the social sciences have recently begun to enjoy increased popularity. Like the interdisciplinary excitement which earlier linked the behavioral and social sciences to problems in environmental design, this event points to yet greater potential for collaboration between the social sciences, on the one hand, and the design disciplines, on the other. Whereas the interdisciplinary environmental design movement tended to focus specifically on the relationship between humans and the built urban environment (although some landscape architects properly extended their investigations to rural and natural environments), the intersection of visual sociology and the sociology of the visual arts encompasses a potentially much wider symbolic and experiential interdisciplinary universe. The references in this bibliography are intended as guideposts to help us explore this promising possibility.

The joint field of visual sociology and the sociology of the visual arts might, at first thought, seem somewhat narrow or obscure. When one considers, however, the extent to which most individuals and groups depend upon the visual mode for information as well as expression, the scope of visual studies in sociology widens appreciably. Further, the questions raised in pursuit of visual sociology and the sociology of the visual require wide interdisciplinary reading, in advertising, aesthetics, anthropology, architecture, economics, film, journalism, landscape design, political science, popular culture, and psychology, to name a few. Understanding the structure and social significance of the visual world requires that attention be paid to several interlocking institutional and disciplinary spheres.

The visual mode is a major, if not the central, channel through which most people except the blind interact with their social environment. One's everyday life is filled with visual images of friends, family, co-workers, strangers. Visual images include architecture, bumper stickers, posters, sculpture, graffiti, clothing fashions, hair styles, interior design, furniture, landscape architecture, motion pictures, television, photographs, books, magazines, letters, children's art projects, museums, religious icons, paintings, gestures, postures, and so forth. The combined focus of visual sociology and the sociology of the visual arts examines the reflexive relationships between such images and social structure. Not only are such images formed and shaped by social process, visual images also interact with social structures.

Recent Background

Recent interest in this area is represented in the United States by the Visual Sociology Association of which Timothy Curry, Department of Sociology, Ohio State University, was elected president in 1983 (1). The major journal in the field is the International Journal of Visual Sociology, published by the Center for International Media Research in Holland. This publication is the outgrowth of two previous journals: the European Newsletter on Visual Sociology and the American Visual Sociology Quarterly, both of which appeared on a regular basis for three years before the appearance of the IJVS in 1983 (2).

Howard Becker estimates that the critical mass necessary for significant progress in the field of visual social science came together most recently in the eight to ten years before 1979 (3). Henny reports that specifically visual presentations have been regular features of sociological conventions in Europe and the U.S. and at the world congresses of Sociology in 1974, 1978, and 1982 (4). The first International Conference on Visual Sociology was held August 29-31, 1983, at the University of Windsor, Windsor, Canada, just prior to the ASA meetings in Detroit (5).

Related interests in the sociology of the arts are now explored at the conferences on Social Theory, Politics, and the Arts. The most recent conference, co-chaired by Judith Balfe and Margaret Wyszomirski, was held at Rutgers in 1983. An edited collection of papers from this conference is forthcoming from Praeger. The next meeting, chaired by John Robinson, is scheduled

for 1984 at the University of Maryland--College Park in October.

Persons interested in this field may wish to join the Sociology of Art section of the International Sociological Association.

Membership information is available from Vera Zolberg, Liberal Studies, The New School for Social Research, 65 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003.

Toward a Working Definition

Howard Becker observes in his comments on the characteristics of visual social science that it is a field for people who can tolerate a bit of disorder (6). Investigations of the visual aspects of society do not fit in a compact, orderly compartment. Henny suggests that "visual sociology, in fact transcends the established subdivisions of sociology" (7). In the same vein, the 1930 edition of the Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences defines "art" as comprising the "whole of civilization," a degree of inclusiveness hardly diminished by the usual practice in aesthetics and the social sciences of dividing "art" between the useful arts and the fine arts (8). To free-wheeling scholars, the expansive implications of these definitions exhilarates rather than startles. It is sometimes useful, however, to circumscribe a somewhat smaller orbit than the "whole of visible civilization transcending the established subdivisions of sociology" when filling out grant applications, writing a dissertation proposal, or proposing a new course listing for the college catalog.

For the purposes of assembling this bibliography, a tentative working definition of visual studies in the social sciences was used to guide the selection process. This definition may not be absolutely necessary, but it does have its uses. Leonard Henny, editor of the International Journal of Visual Sociology, recently commented:

...there is no real need to define visual sociology succinctly, except perhaps for bureaucratic reasons (which in turn may at times be important for the survival of activities that tend to be underappraised in the department of sociology) (9).

Defining the intersecting fields of visual sociology and the sociology of the visual arts is, pragmatically, required in the everyday bureaucratic world of grant applications, doctoral exams, curriculum committees, and so forth. At the same time, conceptual and theoretical inquiries are often more easily advanced when individual scholars arrive at personally meaningful definitions of their work, even if, as a group, they have not yet arrived at the consensus necessary for a discipline-wide definition.

Thus, the definition offered here is intended as a tentative, working suggestion which may, for some, provide useful fodder for meeting various bureaucratic hurdles. For others, it may provide a suitable "jumping off place" for further elaborate and conceptual refinement. The field of inquiry jointly opened by the terms visual sociology and the sociology of the visual arts is here defined as:

Exploration of the reflexive relationships between social structures, on the one hand, and the choice, apprehension, perception, cognition, and creation of visual imagery, on the other.

Given this rubric, the remainder of this introduction outlines some specific avenues of inquiry which warrant further conceptual explication and empirical investigation.

Initial Investigations

The exceptionally wide scope of visual studies in the social sciences provides many opportunities for investigation and conceptual development. The following outlines five areas of focused inquiry, but these are, at best, a basic core which other students will quickly expand through further reading and study:

(1) Definition of the field: What are the social factors that influence vision, what influences the way we see things and assign meaning to what we see? What is the nature, role and institutional organization of visual symbolism in the social construction of reality? What insights into the nature and organization of society are distinctively revealed through the analysis of visual images?

(2) Social images in media: Specific attention should be directed to photography, television, and motion pictures. The content and images in entertainment, informational programs, and advertising should be reviewed. The control of media images by corporations and other institutions is ripe for exploration. Do visual images in the media encourage social change or merely mimic change?

(3) Visual dimensions of social interaction: Attention here can be focused on nonverbal communication and body image. In

what ways do clothing and fashion serve as symbols of status and power? In what ways are body images used in artistic ways, beyond the more mundane aspects of nonverbal communication per se? In what ways are entire landscapes used as cues for various forms of social behavior?

(4) The sociology of visual art: Other readers will want to examine the social content of both formal and popular art as well as the art world as a social institution. Who goes to art museums, and why? To what degree is art an autonomous institution? To what extent is it deeply embedded in linkages to other institutions? What are the distinctive characteristics and symbolizations in the visual arts? What social meanings are attached as cultural baggage to these symbols?

(5) Visual technology and social organization: What are the consequences of major developments in visual technology (photography, motion pictures, television, color printing, Xerox machines, etc.) for institutions such as the family, education, politics, business, and so on? What role do "family snapshots" play in structuring one's personal history? To what extent do the major social institutions control the development, sale, and use of visual technology? What are the best uses of visual technology in the study of society, in education, in fostering human understanding?

These brief suggestions will hopefully spark additional ideas for exploring the social and institutional dimensions of the vast totality of experience we call "visual." Indeed, the project can

even be inverted to ask, "What would be the nature of a human society in which visual experiences are entirely absent?" Perhaps such theoretical investigations would lead to new concepts for organizing the sighted world in a manner better suited to the needs of blind citizens in this and other societies.

What is most exciting about focusing on the visual arts is not only the potential to learn something sociologically significant, but also the potential to learn something about the nature of social science itself. Sociological understanding of artistic creation and confrontation opens unexpected avenues.

Jean Duvignaud, in his *Sociology of Art*, suggests:

...one can draw three consequences for an analysis of man, confronted by artistic creativity and at the same time deeply involved in social life: artistic imagination involves a participation which can never be realized; to a large extent it anticipates what is possible experience by drawing on actual experience; and thirdly, it is a wager on the capacity of human beings to invent new relationships and to experience hitherto unknown emotions. (10)

Art, then, becomes not only an avenue for changing the known, it transcends the given and opens the unknown. In Arnold Hauser's words:

Art is a source of knowledge not only because it immediately continues the work of the sciences and completes their discoveries, especially in psychology, but also because it points out the limits of scientific competence and takes over at the point at which further knowledge can be acquired only along paths which cannot be trodden outside of art. Through art we come to understandings which expand our knowledge even though they are not of an abstract-scientific nature. (11)

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An open exchange between sociology and the visual arts thus offers the basis for a reflexive critique of sociological knowledge claims. There is much here to be learned not only for oneself but for society (and sociology as well) from a study of the intersection of three major dimensions of humanity: Art, Society, and Vision. In the study of these dimensions, we forward the transformation of society as well as the social sciences. It is hoped that the bibliography presented here will assist you in beginning this transformation.

Notes

- (1) International Journal of Visual Sociology, Vol. 1, summer, p. 78.
- (2) Léonard M. Henny, "Editorial," International Journal of Visual Sociology, Vol. 1, summer 1983, p. 4.
- (3) Howard S. Becker, "Preface," in Jon Wagner, ed., Images of Information: Still Photography in the Social Sciences. Sage Publications, 1979, p. 7.
- (4) Henny, loc. cit.
- (5) International Journal of Visual Sociology, op. cit., pp. 77-78.
- (6) Becker, op. cit.
- (7) Henny, op. cit., p. 3.
- (8) Irwin Edman, "Art," Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, 1930, Vol. 2, p. 223.
- (9) Henny, op. cit., p. 4.
- (10) Jean Duvignaud, The Sociology of Art. Harper and Row, 1972, p. 143.
- (11) Arnold Hauser, The Sociology of Art. University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 5.

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