



SOCIAL VISUALITIES

Filmic Sociology Theory and Practice

Joyce Sebag
Jean-Pierre Durand



Social Visualities

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Social Visualities

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Joyce Sebag • Jean-Pierre Durand

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Theory and Practice

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ISSN 2731-4626

Social Visualities

ISBN 978-3-031-33695-9

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-33696-6>

ISSN 2731-4634 (electronic)

ISBN 978-3-031-33696-6 (eBook)

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Cover illustration: Jean-Pierre Durand

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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It will be one of the revolutionary functions of cinema

to show that the value of photography is indissolubly artistic and scientific, whereas, until now, these two aspects have generally been distinct.

*Walter Benjamin**The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, 1935*

*To Simon, Maïa, Joseph, Lili, Stella
Manon, Hannah
and their parents*

Foreword¹

It is gratifying to witness the English publication of *Filmic Sociology*, which appears after decades of work by two great French intellectuals. Joyce Sebag and Jean-Pierre Durand distill insights from sociological filmmaking, theorizing, teaching, supervising visual dissertations, international dialogue, and other intellectual work into a coherent and persuasive statement. It is a gift to have these vast and varied insights brought into a single volume.

The book is encyclopedic in scope, yet is constructed around several intellectual and methodological tensions. It is a theoretical tour de force that also describes filmic and visual methods in detail. Sebag and Durand describe origins of visual sociology in documentary photography and film, particularly in the work of Robert Frank, Alexander Rodchenko, and the American Farm Security Administration (FSA) project. They review filmic work related to French and British anthropological fieldwork, and, especially, parallels in early documentary film (Robert Flaherty, etc.) during its long gestation during the twentieth century, before the revolutionary impact of cinema verite in the 60 s. By the end of the book they have extended arguments to cell phone cinema and other aspects of the current digital and social media tsunami.

¹ Douglas Harper is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. He is the founder of the “International Visual Sociology Association” in the early 1980s and of *Visual Sociology*, now *Visual Studies*. He is the author of numerous academic books including *Visual Sociology* (Routledge, 2012, new issue in 2023).

They question how sociological thinking represented in words is related to sociological thinking via the image. These are complex, speculative, and thought-provoking arguments, dealing with sequence, narration, symbolism, image versus word communication, visual imagination, and the nature of thought itself. The authors remind us of our assumptions that sociological interpretations and analyses can be unproblematically represented in words and statistical relationships, yet the discipline continues to struggle with the viability of visual representation as a path to sociological understanding.

Durand and Sebag call their project a “spider’s web” in which visual (in most instances, filmic) thinking and technique is interwoven with sociological theory and method. Their book is not a “how-to” manual; rather it is a reflection on dialogues between research acts, intellectual theorizing, and negotiation of the visual. At the core of this spider’s web is the reconciliation of rationality and emotive sensitivity; the ability of images to denote the world (show us something that is absolutely there) while touching our human capacity for empathy, joy, and sorrow. It is in this dualism (rationality and emotion) that the mysterious potential of visual sociology ultimately comes to rest.

The tradition that became filmic sociology is well represented by French photographers, filmmakers, anthropologists with cameras and sociologists with photographic strategies. A beginning list would include Louis Clergeau, Agnès Varda, Marc Riboud, Jean Rouch, Sabine Weiss, Gisele Freund, and sociologist Edgar Morin. French sociology has always balanced a commitment to scientific rigor with moral regard for the social order. While it has flirted with qualitative methods in recent decades it remained to Sebag and Durand to make the breakthrough to filmic sociology. Thus it is fitting that this revolutionary moment has taken place in France and is now available to English speaking audiences.

Yet their filmic sociology is already becoming an international movement. Ten years ago Professor Sebag invited me to be an examiner of Alexandra Tilman’s film based Ph.D., completed under their supervision. This was, to me, an inspiring moment. I am American sociologist who has long fought to legitimize visual sociology, yet I know how easily experiments fail. As a visual sociology insider I am also one of its great critics. I am pleased to say that Tilman’s dissertation film was sociologically rich as well as visually compelling. As a feature-length examination of post-industrial communities in NW France the film presented the structural fact of de-industrialization in the context of an individual’s life, and then radiated into his search for meaning and his relationships, within his family and beyond. The film is a poetic, beautiful, and insightful application of C. Wright Mills’ dictum to see the structural forces of society in the lives of the individual. In Tilman’s film, as well as other films by Sebag and Durand’s graduate students (including films by Greg-

ory Cohen and Manon Ott) the proof has been in the pudding; the success of the student reflects the success of their professors in laying the groundwork, nourishing creative instincts, and, yes, keeping great experiments under control. It was in these films by their graduate students that Sebag and Durand's commitment to professional quality filmmaking was matched to intellectual rigor, sociological imagination, and the poetic and narrative capacity of film.

Sociology by and large has not followed the paths of our anthropology colleagues in developing a film tradition. There have been exceptions; John Grady's well known documentary films made in the 1970s come to mind, and more recently the film projects of sociologists Molly Merriman and Greg Scott, in Scott's case integrated into graduate studies. But I know of no Ph.D. program in the United States where a graduate student may produce a film as the substance of their sociological dissertation, as Sebag and Durand's students have done. There is no doubt that the translation of this text into English will energize this possibility.

In 2017 Durand and Sebag hosted the thirty-eighth meeting of the International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) at the University of Évry near Paris. Until recently the IVSA had focused primarily on still photography, semiotics, theorizing about image meaning and the role of images in society. Durand and Sebag, for the first time, embraced film as a central theme of the conference. Instead of a keynote address they invited two American filmmaker-sociologists to join them in a discussion of the past and future of filmic sociology. It was a fascinating dialogue that showed how filmic sociology, experimental to its core, crosses national boundaries and scholarly traditions. In recent IVSA meetings developments begun in Évry have continued to flourish.

Their book is much in the spirit of that meeting. The authors are innovators who teach, design programs, dialogue with colleagues around the world, try out new ideas in their own work, and always distill, refine and develop their work into a clear and coherent path.

The translation of this book to English adds an important voice and perspective to the small but very interesting library of texts on visual sociology. The emphasis on the *filmic dimension* makes it unique. It is also the case that the orientation emerging from French sociology also distinguishes it from texts that have emerged from other countries and intellectual traditions. There is no doubt that the English version of this book strengthens and invigorates the international visual sociology movement and deserves to be read, debated, and integrated into our undergraduate and graduate visual sociology courses.

Acknowledgments

This book is the result of a long process of academic research, university teaching, and documentary filmmaking. The master's degree in Sociology, *Image and Society*, at the University of Evry Paris-Saclay was created in 1996 from a workshop that brought together professionals and academics; it has been a place of exchange that has enriched our reflection on filmic sociology. We would like to thank Maurice Kherroubi, Habib Tengour, Pierre Maillot, Sylvia Calle, Jean-Pierre Lenoir, Pierre Linhart, Christophe Novak, Réjane Vallée, Nassim Cherikh, Véronique Decours-Rozencwajg, Jean-Marc Gayman, and Christine Louveau with whom we had intense intellectual exchanges. A number of those mentioned above have also read and enriched the manuscript.

The supervision of doctoral students, Alexandra Tilman, Virginie Villemin, Manon Ott, Grégory Cohen, Émilie Balteau, Hanane Idihia, and Émilie Fernandez, was also an opportunity to reflect on filmic sociology over time. Progress also took place more informally during discussions and meetings with Jean-Pascal Fontorbes, Jean-Paul Gehin, Anne-Marie Granié, Michaël Meyer, Roger Rozencwajg, Daniel Vander Gucht, Fabien Reix, Sylvaine Conord, Francesca Biagi-Chaï, Daniel Friedmann, and Jacques Lombard.

These research activities took place at the Pierre Naville Research Center of the University of Evry Paris-Saclay, with sociologist colleagues and successive department heads of it. All of them were convinced of the possible scientific possibilities opened by filmic sociology. The Pierre Naville Center also held several conferences in Evry and co-financed the production of some of our sociological documentaries. We also thank the presidents Michel Fayard, Patrick Curmi of the University of Evry, who actively supported scientific projects and events in filmic sociology.

The associations of French (AFS), European (ESA), and international (IVSA, ISA) sociologists have all enthusiastically welcomed filmic sociology and have supported its development. We thank them here.

Our thanks go to Douglas Harper, Michael Burawoy, Suzanne Newman, Edgar Belmont, Luca Querero Palmas, Luisa Stagi, Massimo Cannarella, Alessandro Diaco, Paul Stewart, Aziz Hlaoua, and Alan Sitkin, who participated in the international development of filmic sociology at over the past decade.

We wish to thank Armelle Lotton and Tom Larvor of the University Library of Evry and Mathieu Mulcey, Bénédicte Souffrant, Marie Léman, and Martine Bertéa of CNRS Editions for their efforts in the editing and publishing of this work.

For this English version, we thank Nathaniel London, our translator, who did a valuable job of researching the American and English versions of the works cited. Sharla Plant and Elizabeth Graber referred us to our editors Gary Bratchford and Dennis Zuev who founded the “Social Visualities” series. They supported us in our project to publish this book. Their commitment to the development of this new field is a great help. Liam Inscoe-Jones, Connie Li, and Ellen Seo have been very rigorous in the production of *Filmic Sociology*.

Finally, these acknowledgments would be incomplete if they did not include all the people we met during the production of our documentaries. They welcomed us with confidence and were fully committed to the collaboration that we offered them, whether it be among Nummi workers, Nissan employees, women, or men met during the shooting of *Femmes en banlieue*. The production of *Boston, 50 years of Affirmative Action* created lasting ties with Joel Schwartz, Sharon Reilly, Eden E. Williams, Nika Elugardo, and the Lee family, who never gave up on their generosity and commitment.

Praise for *Filmic Sociology*

United States

“What Joyce Sebag and Jean-Pierre Durand propose is literally to ‘think by images.’ The image is not an element constructed afterwards by thinking, it is first by the perception, and constitutive in the act of thinking.”

—Guillaume Sirois, Professor, *Université de Montréal*,
Visual Studies, Vol. 36 I.4–5, 2021

Canada

“Harper, in the Foreword, compares filmic sociology to a ‘spider’s web. This powerful book is a reflective manual. It’s a manifesto for a visual and filmic sociology.”

—Aziz Hlaoua, Professor at *Rabat University*, *Communication*
(Quebec), 2022

France

“In this book, filmic sociology emancipates itself from the written word, because if the visible and the lived can screen what is hidden, it is the narrative construction proposed by the film that must make them perceptible: the image contextualises what is said in order to better understand it, the image tells of relations ignored by traditional sociology.”

—Pascal Cesaro, Assistant Professor (*Aix-Marseille University*),
in *Images du travail, travail des images* (France), 2022

Brazil

“For the authors, filmic sociology produces knowledges from the recording of sounds and images, during viewing or analysis of the rushes, and finally, during editing, which juxtaposes them to create meaning and fresh visions. Then the practice of the sociologist-filmmaker provides a reintegration of the sensitive in the discipline through the audiovisual production.”

—Rafael Fermino Beverari, *Universidade Estadual de Campinas*,
Tempo Social (Brazil), 2021

France

“For Sebag and Durand, the hybridization of sociological and cinematographic approaches is at the heart of filmic sociology. More than documentary evidence, the sociological film must be received as a tool for reflection and debate. It brings

the reader back into the territory of reasoning after inviting him to open up sociological thought to the emotions and the imagination.”

—Nicolas Hatzfeld, Professor of History, *IDHES-CNRS*,
La Nouvelle Revue du Travail (France), 2022

Italia

“The merit of Joyce Sebag and Jean-Pierre Durand is that they have skillfully shown us the heuristic potential of a complex discipline: images and sounds that are good for reflection, and for producing progress in the direction of a dialogic and polysemous knowledge of reality.”

—Gianfranco Spitelli, *University of Teramo, Voci* (Italia), 2021

Canada

“The authors defend two central ideas linked to the very foundations of sociological film-making. Firstly, an attachment to scientific rigor where the construction of the object, the fieldwork and the methodological tools of the discipline are combined. Secondly, filmic sociology is considered as a research tool as much as a medium, in which the out of shot is consubstantial with reality.”

—Pierre Fraser, Sociologist-filmmaker, *Sociologie visuelle* (Canada), 2021

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Introduction

1

Documentary films—launched by Edison in the United States and the Lumière brothers in France—and sociology were born during the nineteenth century, some 50 years apart. Their initial encounter, however, took place when sociology started analyzing documentaries and using cinema and photography as raw materials that captured the reality it tried to describe and explain. This took place as sociology, associated with other related disciplines, such as semiology and aesthetics, attempted a critical analysis of films dealing with social issues, whether documentary or fictional.

Practicing sociology *through* cinema, i.e., using all its techniques, from capturing images and sound to editing a film or mastering film writing, is a challenge that several universities have been attempting to meet, particularly in Europe and increasingly in the United States. This book presents an overview and outlines the principles of what *filmic sociology* can be.

Images are not counterposed to text. Whether fixed or animated, they speak of reality but do so in a different way, giving great importance to emotions, to the colors of the world. Filmic sociology today follows the paths cleared by ethnology and anthropology. It aims at writing sociology in a new way: taking an interest in narration (often forgotten in sociological writing), considering the form of the presentation (the style in paper-based writing), the quality of images, and the rhythm of the presentation in the film. The practice of video in sociology reintegrates sensitivity, emotions, spaces, and bodies into the discipline. Filmic sociology produces knowledge from the recording of sounds and images, on the one hand, with greater detail than direct observation or audio interviews, and on the other hand, during viewing and analysis of the rushes, which requires repeated viewing of images and

sounds, and finally, during editing, which juxtaposes them to create meaning and new visions.

Of course, uniting cinema and sociology requires a solid background in the discipline, but above all, a willingness to break down the partitions separating disciplinary fields through a thorough apprenticeship in the techniques and history of cinema, particularly that of documentary films. Combining the different professions of cinema and sociology is a resolutely innovative approach that should lead to the emergence of new approaches. In-depth education in these two significant cultures is the foundation of this combination.

This book draws on a collective experience, developed since the 1996 creation of the *Image and Society* program in the Master's degree in Sociology at the University of Évry, a new university close to Paris opened in 1990 during the administration of François Mitterrand. This experience includes the supervision of Ph.D. students in *filmic sociology* based on the production of a sociological documentary, and the subsequent creation of institutional networks in France and Europe, with branches in the United States and North Africa.

The objective of this book is to gather the pieces of a vast puzzle in the establishment of a maturing field, filmic sociology. It proceeds from a cumulative approach to what already exists. It places reference points so that students or researchers can maintain an overview of the delicate task of making a sociological documentary. Nevertheless, it retains a reflexive dimension on the final product, that is, on the process that combines film culture—history, filmic analysis, techniques, and essential principles of filmic writing—with sociological knowledge. Thus, we do not deal with theoretical questions relating to image or cinema in particular chapters, but they run throughout the book, each chapter referring to the others. A puzzle, network, or a spider web are all images that refer to the complexity of this scientific field under construction. Nor do we cover here the technical issues to be mastered for shooting, sound recording, and editing because there are many specialized books and quality training courses on these subjects. These techniques are not a secondary aspect, since their mastery determines the quality of a sociological documentary. Apprentice sociologists or those wishing to consolidate their knowledge will refer to one of the many manuals or introductions to the discipline.

This book brings together reflections, educational material, and articles produced over two decades, hence its diversity. This diversity is that of the objects treated as well as of the nature of the approaches, which can be theoretical—sociological, philosophical, or epistemological—or more analytical and critical when they comment on still or moving images. It includes a variety of points of view that are at once historical, sociological, or borrowed from other human sciences, such

as semiology, in order to anchor filmic sociology in the debates that have taken place in these disciplines. Finally, many personal achievements (photos and documentaries) associated with productions by other creators help to establish the reasoning and theses developed. This book brings together and deepens reflections and perspectives that have been dispersed over time. Each chapter or section gives coherence to this fragmentation on a particular issue. Thus, all these elements converge to support a possible hybridization or cross-breeding of the two approaches of sociology and cinema. Both are different expressions of a “relationship to the world,” a way of understanding the world. This hybridization reconciles two universes long perceived as contradictory, one of rationality and the other of emotion or sensitivity. The cinematographic writing of sociology gives us access to what is part of the understanding of the social world through emotion and sensitivity. It reinforces our understanding of the latter. This hybridization thus opens up many avenues for reflection and debate, far from certainties, and based on an innovative proposal: to produce something else, the sociological documentary.

To get to the heart of the matter, Chap. 2 explains the approach of filmic sociology by comparing it to written text. Some necessary principles in making a sociological documentary follow, with a debate on its contribution to the sociological tradition. Filmic sociology is based on the distant heritage of ethnologists’ photography and films, and subsequently on documentary photography. Chapter 3 presents their history and concludes with documentary films in general, from the 1920s to today, with some points of reference in contemporary production. Chapter 4 goes to the heart of sociology/cinema hybridization by first asking what it means to *think in images*. This raises the question of the nature of sociological images and, finally, to the production of a sociological meaning of images in filmic sociology.

Starting from the close relationship between interactionism and filmic practices in the sociologist-filmmaker’s relations with his characters, Chap. 5 raises, in particular, the question of the author’s distancing and commitment, far from false neutrality and compassion. Filmic sociology cannot avoid questioning the point of view adopted by the sociologist-filmmaker, especially since he must think about the camera’s position as well as its movement. This chapter ends with the status of “scientific residues”: it questions the future of those sequences and images/sounds that remain in the hands of the sociologist-filmmaker after editing. Chapter 6 seeks ways of representing the intangible in the sociological documentary. After a review of the representation and “reality effect” of cinema and some proposals to represent the invisible, the chapter discusses the contributions and status of filmed interviews in filmic sociology.

By organizing the back and forth between theory and practice—hence the diverse character of the texts between chapters or between sections—this book

presents and discusses *filmic sociology* to show that overcoming doubts about the hybridization of sociology and cinema is possible under two conditions. The first condition is to highlight the mutual willingness of sociologists and film professionals to converge their impulses toward a shared objective and, second, to open a Master's curricula in Sociology to train documentary sociologists and pursue the institutionalization of the field of filmic sociology. This includes ensuring that sociologists enter the "society of images" at full speed, no longer by commenting on it, but by producing sociological images.



The Approach of Filmic Sociology

2

The development of filmic sociology derives from a long process, associating several disciplines of the humanities with that of cinema as representations of the world. Light camera and synchronous sound development in the 1960s favored this convergence. Invention and dissemination of video soon followed, accompanied by the decline in material costs, especially in consumables such as film. However, one should not prematurely conclude that this decline in costs has solved all problems. Other questions have arisen around the supplementary costs of the digital pipeline or the over-supply of rushes.

Following several earlier attempts in the 1960–1980 period (see the next chapter), the creation of the Sociology Master's degree Image and Society in 1996 at the University of Évry initiated training and research in filmic sociology. This master's degree and the defense of doctoral theses in filmic sociology have led to academic recognition. In 2012, a thematic network in the Professional Association of Sociology (rt47.hypotheses.org/) was inaugurated. Systematic questioning of image-based work is now a thing of the past. Image and sound have gained status in sociology alongside of and in osmosis with text.

Having developed the three functions of filmic sociology, the first chapter develops without hierarchization the differences between knowledge linked to writing and that linked to images and sounds. It then discusses what it means to make a sociological documentary before asking what such a documentary, which goes beyond the written word, might say.

With this in mind, this chapter plunges the reader at length into three documentaries showing what cinema can say from images and sound alone or by mixing them with interviews. These three documentaries deal with work at different work-sites and underline, through the filmic analysis proposed, to what degree cinema can refine knowledge of what takes place in this enclosed space. This awareness of thinking through images appears to be a condition of access to filmic sociology, which this chapter proposes to introduce. It, therefore, ends with modalities for teaching this growing field and reasons for pursuing it up to a doctoral dissertation.

1 Three Interrelated Functions of Filmic Sociology

Filmic sociology aims at developing cinema, combining the diversity of sociological theorization with cinematographic techniques—shooting images and sound, and editing—to which one must add a knowledge of film writing with its codes and customs. The foundations of sociological filmmaking thus bring together:

- an attachment to scientific rigor, combining the construction of the object, field-work, and methodological tools of the discipline;
- a research instrument as well as a medium—different from the text—opening up alternative approaches. Amongst other factors, it integrates emotions and body movements, including highlighting reactions of individuals as they become actors in front of the camera and no longer just “objects” of research.

Thus, filmic sociology and the camcorder, far from a simple instrument or tool capturing images and sounds employed in research, filmed interviews, and spatial memorization also give access to the sensory world observed by the researcher. They question the epistemological dimension of the visible and the invisible. Even more, by highlighting the reality of off-camera, they question sociology about what it often leaves out, while having an acute awareness that the off-camera is consubstantial with reality. The sociologist-filmmaker chooses a point of view, or rather a point of vision (Magny 2001), through a certain amount of interference due to his physical equipment—the camcorder and tripod, or even a boom for sound and lighting equipment—that he places here and there. This point of vision becomes explicit in order to emphasize the connections in the filmed scenes, including the discussions between the film’s characters.