

A Manifesto for Visual and Filmic Sociology

The following proposals reflect the joint efforts of social science specialists and filmmakers working on behalf of two European filmic sociology research laboratories and collaborating in the wake of two international conferences: May 2015 in Genoa (Italy); and September 2016 in Evry (France). The purpose of this Manifesto is to connect the kinds of approaches taken by sociologists, on one hand, with those pursued by photographers or filmmakers, on the other. This extends, revives and re-creates certain paradigms dating from the 1950s-1970s, based on the idea that recognising the cumulative nature of a certain kind of thinking can spark its further development.

Sociology, itself the product of confrontations between several disciplines, has become a scientific activity which created the tools legitimising its own field of knowledge. Re-assessing the process producing written scientific output enhances understanding of the contributions that images and sounds can make to this process. Long neglected or considered peripheral to the abstract output, many sociologists now see perceptions of images and sounds both as bona fide variables playing a real role in objects' construction and also as key problematisation moments mobilising the conceptual apparatus associated with a particular kind of field work. Altogether, this becomes sociologists' background, initiation and point of differentiation, explaining their participation in a process culminating in the production of one representation of reality. Sociological texts generated in this way can then be re-interpreted in light of the reader's own knowledge and perceptions.

Conceptualising how a scientific production process works within a sociological documentary entails a similar approach. Twinning like reality/sensorial perception, construction of the object/fieldwork and conceptual apparatus/prior investigation might all be mobilised by sociologists-documentary-maker coming from a similar background. Having said that, sensorial intake has a second role to play here. Sight and hearing can be made visible and audible when certain images and sounds are used. They therefore have a big role to play in the construction of a representation of reality. Choices about framing and sequencing, what goes on-camera or off, sound, camera movement, the film's rhythm and the choice of timings encapsulated in its shooting and editing – all of these phases are explicit representations of the point of view. Not to mention the fact that showing a documentary on a screen means subjecting it to spectators' receptiveness and background.

Far from wanting to normalise this field, the purpose here is to encourage debate and reflection culminating in general recognition of the value of visual and filmic texts in sociology. The present Manifesto should therefore be considered a work in progress meant to drive debate relating to shifts in a broader discipline.

1 – Visual and filmic sociology opens up other perspectives

The goal here is to encourage the production of photos or films made by sociologists as part of their research work. Sociological documentaries or photos (note that everything written

below applies as much to still pictures as to moving images) offer an original approach that integrates images and sounds into sociology in order to produce new outcomes. Sociologists construct the singularity of their approaches and it is on this basis that observation, analysis and conceptualisation occurs. It is crucial not to separate the observer's subjectivation from this conceptualisation work. In short, the purpose of visual and filmic sociology is to offer new research perspectives and disseminate findings to a wider audience.

2 – Sociological documentaries link disciplinary approaches to the filmmaker's output

Sociology uses concepts and paradigms to apprehend social reality. A sociological documentary integrates all of the work approaches that a sociologist uses plus any employed by a filmmaker. Sociologists apprehend reality in verbal language. Cinematographic language offers them a possibility of new meanings. Visual and filmic sociology combines sociology's scientific and conceptual apparatus with the language of photography and cinema. Filmic sociology captures images and sounds and turns them into something relevant and congruent with the subject in question – at which point, the processes become an integral part of the sociological approach.

3 – Sociological documentaries overcome the tensions between the language of cinema and sociological argumentation

Even as it re-casts the spotlight on emotions, narratives and individuals depicted as characters, visual and filmic sociology remains rooted in science, understood here as the ability to question, conceptualise, reject easy thinking and seek deeper understanding.

4 – Sociological documentaries deconstruct evidence

It is at this level that the new field meshes with sociological critiques of presupposition. The sociologist-filmmaker's viewpoint is one that has been constructed into something scientific situated in a specific context. By looking beyond social appearances, this scientific undertaking reveals what other manufacturers of meaning may be trying to hide. Deconstructing evidence and doxa also means deconstructing domination. Sociological documentaries suggest and/or show the foundations and mechanisms underlying social phenomena.

5 – Sociological documentaries spark debates about viewpoint diversity while amplifying reflexivity

Sociological documentaries enhance the visibility both of intersubjective interactions and of the core relationships of some of the objects found in modern sociological thinking. The nature of this effort is based on the desire to cross very diverse visions about one and the same question while giving a range of social actors the sense that they have been recognised and their viewpoint listened to. The multitude of fragmented visions that confront one another in this field give spectators a great deal of freedom to reflect.

Sociological documentaries situate words by associating them with singular professional and generational histories and trajectories. They offer initial findings that are recognisable to certain social actors and which open dialogue up to everyone else with an interest in these

questions. It is the quality of a scientific film that broadens the dissemination of a research project and raises fruitful questions. When research is restituted within the many audiences affected by it, the object of research can become the research itself.

6 – Visual and filmic sociology is a way to co-produce knowledge

Through the relationship between the parties making the film and the parties being filmed, researchers negotiate with research subjects the forms and modalities of a representation in which actors' anonymity disappears. This negotiation, along with several technical questions implied in the act of filming, encourages the co-construction of the research project and sociological documentary. It is through this pre-production work and the subsequent filming and editing that space and time becomes a new social field, one whose analysis qualifies as part of the production of knowledge.

7 – Sociological documentaries differ from activist documentaries and lend themselves to public sociology

Sociological documentaries differ from their activist counterparts that highlight a single point of view instead of offering a more complex construction of relevant constructs and social facts. The idea here is not only to capture hidden and/or suppressed knowledge but to enable a dynamic translation and restoration of (or expansion in) subjects' ability to be autonomous and to act. In line with the spirit of public sociology, the circulation of knowledge generated by visual and filmic perspectives helps to rethink social sciences in a way that transcends academic pigeonholing.

8 – Cinema, fragmentation of reality and sociological texts

Visual and filmic sociology is not opposed to paper sociology. Both share many codes, including narratives, representations and interpretations of reality. Texts that use images or else words are complementary forms that enrich one another reciprocally.

Perceptions of reality are fragmented. A film can re-fragment them using its own technological mechanisms. When a shot is filmed or a sound recorded – and then edited - the sociologists-filmmakers involved are being discriminatory in the sense that they are classifying, ordering and structuring these fragments of time and space in such a way as to re-construct meaning within a sociological documentary. In other words, filming generates its own body of research, similar to the database constructed in paper sociology. Film editing then corresponds to a form of writing that highlights certain associations, relationships and interpretations within a given framework comprised of an archive of images, references and interviews relating to a particular social phenomenon.

9 – From images to conceptualisation

Since images do not enable conceptualisation, sociological documentaries use metaphors to invent new ways of re-presenting concepts. This transcends superficial perceptions of images and sounds – something necessary because it is specifically this image and sound that lies at the heart of sociological and filmic analysis.

10 – Sociological documentaries combine art and reason

The opposition that has long been imagined between (didactic) sociology and (emotional) cinema is resolved in sociological documentaries grounded in cinematographic art. The driver here are the tensions between the filmmaker's artistic concerns, which include narrative, aesthetics, reflections and the kinds of rational and scientific approaches that are generally associated with sociologists. Being a sociologist-filmmaker means apprehending social reality in all of its complexity using images and sounds, all with a view towards re-transcribing this aesthetically via cinematographic expression.

11 - Multidisciplinarity and the complexity of reality

Filmic sociology combines a plurality of fields (professions and disciplines) in such a way as to question a reality that is generally quite problematic. It is through this crossing of approaches, in a situation based on distancing and questioning, that the conditions of inventiveness arise for sociological documentaries. Visual and filmic sociology encourages interdisciplinarity involving workgroups comprised of a variety of professions, knowledges and types of know-how (cameramen, screenwriters, editors, photographers, etc.) and mixing them with the full range of social sciences (sociology, ethnology, geography, history, social psychology, etc.).

12 - Filmic sociology takes a long time

Filmic sociology needs long production times. In addition to the traditional approaches that sociologists take, sociological documentaries require time to be written and for interested parties to meet (and master their subject). Proximity to subjects and participants must also be developed, without forgetting the time it takes to do the editing work, the subsequent diffusion, etc. Speaking truth can take a while.

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