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USING ART AND ARCHITECTURAL SLIDES IN SOCIOLOGY*

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Sociologists have readily introduced the products of popular culture, including film, television, and advertisements, into their classrooms. The products of high culture, by contrast, may meet with more resistance. Nonetheless, the method of integrating art and architectural slides with social theory is being successfully used in an introductory course with a humanistic emphasis, and it has great potential for a variety of other substantive courses. The why, how, and what of slide collection and presentation are discussed. Consideration is given both to student response and to goals to be achieved through the use of this method.

Art and Architecture? Sociologists have readily introduced the products of popular culture into their classrooms. They have praised the visual impact of advertisements, television programs, and film (Snow 1983; Curry and Clarke 1983). But high culture? We assume the fine arts are a different matter, requiring high social status and/or acquired expertise (Bourdieu 1979/1984). So why introduce them into the classroom, the sociology classroom at that? Why not stick with the products of mass culture that we alternately love and revile, that we all feel free to “de-construct,” that we all presume to understand?

I don't teach at Harvard, Princeton, or Yale. I teach an introductory level course at a major state university. Many of my students have transferred from one of several two-year community colleges. Few, if indeed any, have the socio-economic status or special interest that would lead them to make weekly trips into New York to take in the latest gallery and museum shows. When public art is created for the university buildings and squares, it is quickly defaced. Is there a message here about art and society?

If there is, the one I would draw is: You can't love what you don't know or understand. I am speaking of both art and sociology. If art is suspect in our society, so too is sociology. The popular figure of the sociologist is of a cultural and intellectual incompetent. In the popular imagination, the sociologist is someone who goes around asking stupid questions, tendentiously proving with statistics what everyone already knows through experience. Despite the tens of thousands of students who have sat through sociology courses, this popular image

suggests that few retain any love or even respect the subject. If not high culture, sociology remains foreign culture, a particular language one adopts to write the papers, take the exams, get through the course. Thinking sociologically is not unlike appreciating art—a mode of experience one assumes when asked to and sloughs off when not.

There's a reason for this attitude. I believe it is because we have been asking students to solve the puzzle of sociology without giving them the picture of the whole: namely, of the field itself and its intellectual and historical context.

In my introductory level course, “Modernity and Identity,” I tell students not simply *what* sociology is, but *why* it is. The course is built on a socio-historical framework, in which art and architectural slides play a critical role. Sociology is presented not as gospel truth, but as one way of knowing among many. Its development as a social science is linked to the broad and still relevant questions that men like Descartes and Hobbes began asking. Special attention is paid to the social conditions of their times that made these not just logical questions, but pressing questions of great moment and concern. In this process of revealing the historical contexts behind the sociological theory, art and architectural slides are an exciting method for illustrating points, developing content, and suggesting often subtle shifts in social meanings.

Any reluctance to use this valuable resource may be traced, at least in part, to sociology's alliance with the sciences over the humanities. But this is an area in which these two cultures are not truly in opposition. Certainly historian Peter Gay is right when he argues that “The past is enormously rich and enormously varied; the diversity of its parts does not preclude the unity of the whole,” and, further, that “Art . . . inhabits the same past as business, religion, or politics” (1976, p. xi). It is the very commonality of past experience, as history, which sociology and art share. Through the use of art and architectural slides, we can reinforce both

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the sense of the importance of this past and of the significance of sociology as part and parcel of its development.

THE WHY AND HOW OF SLIDE COLLECTION

The concept behind this method resulted from a sabbatical year at Cambridge University's Martin Centre for Architectural and Urban Studies. I was impressed by the effective use architects made of slide presentations at Cambridge. More unanticipated, though, was the considerable overlap between the development of social theory and architectural theory (cf. Barthel 1986). For the sociologist, buildings can reveal both how people actually lived and their ideas about how people *should* live. Contrasts between societies and epochs can be studied in the images of the built environment. Both architect and sociologist were and are, in their own ways, building social theories.

With this perspective, I began to look with fresh eyes at the built environment. I also began to take slides, thinking first of examples that might be used in my urban sociology course: Roman ruins, English villages and market towns, rural versus industrial landscapes, early urban planning as visible in Bath and London, and, of course, contemporary London, with all its accretions of architecture and history. A trip to Crete added to the files, providing wonderful examples of the layering of urban cultures: Venetian, Turkish, and modern Greek. On my return to the States, old tramping grounds became new sources of visual and sociological interest: New York's neighborhoods and generations of skyscrapers, the stunning architectural changes in Boston's historic development. Even suburban Long Island became an intense experience in the layers of symbolism in the social, and occasionally anti-social, landscape. In the process, it soon became apparent that architecture did not speak only to urban sociology. For example, slides depicting the interiors and exteriors of nineteenth century dwellings—from magnificent English country houses to New England gothic cottages—could illustrate and develop a lecture for the sociology of gender on the doctrine of separate spheres as it applied to the division of social spaces. Visual images of suburban homes and the suburban infrastructure (malls, expressways, business vs. residential zoning) could drive home the theoretical points well made by both sociologists and architectural historians concerning gender assumptions build into our physical environment (Hayden 1984, Fava 1983).

During the year abroad when I began collecting slides of the built environment, I was sharing my intellectual environment with both

architects and artists. Thus it was a natural and logical step to look more closely at the sociological content in paintings. This content is recognized in sociology of art classes. But it has not been widely recognized that such sociological content can prove useful in other sociology courses. It soon became obvious to me that there was indeed a wealth of landscape and genre paintings depicting earlier social forms, that individual portraits revealed changing conceptions of the self, and that family portraits displayed in almost uncanny fashion our different expectations and assumptions regarding family structure and intimacy.

One had to know where to look. There was, in truth, great pleasure in the hunt. The process started in the university library which, like most others, had volumes describing the major art collections. London, of course, provided the best first source, with its wide offerings at the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the Wallace Collection, and the Tate. Since I had at this time no guidelines as to what I would find other than the previews offered by the collection descriptions, I proceeded slowly, gauging whether each slide would add to a given lecture topic in this introductory course. The thrill of discovery came often, as when pairing a slide of a Medieval stained glass window depicting God using a compass to design the heavens, with William Blake's image of Newton using a similar compass to redesign the heaven's according to the new science he helped promote. Such visual juxtapositions add points to lectures on secularization and the rise of science as a new way of understanding the physical and social world. Paintings of great renown for artistic reasons may interest the sociologist for other reasons more specifically tied to content. Hans Holbein's "The Ambassadors" (1533) is only one example. This complex painting develops a theme of culture contact. What will interest sociologists is the idea of ambassadors *per se*, the regularization of such exchanges of peoples and ideas. We see two ambassadors posed standing in front of a table, on which are displayed symbols of learning and exploration: globes, sundials, a half open book of arithmetic, a lute and hymnbooks. Further, what first looks like a remarkably large smear running across the painting's foreground is, in fact, a perfect skull when viewed from the far right. This painting tells students something about the period's preoccupation with death as well as its fascination with optics. This painting worked very well in a lecture on the sources and consequences of culture contact, particularly when related to Braudel's discussion of the new attitudes and new technologies of this age of exploration and discovery.

On the same theme of culture contact, a later

picture, Pietro Longhi's "Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice" graphically illustrates the European fascination with new products resulting from exploration and consequence exchange. The painting depicts exactly what the title suggests: several curious eighteenth century men and women viewing what was, in fact, a rhinoceros of particular renown. As the catalogue copy states, "Brought to Europe in 1741 by Captain David Montvandermeer, the rhinoceros was probably the first seen by Europeans for over two centuries . . . A learned scholar, Scipione Maffei, published a dissertation on it in 1751 and it 'sat' for its portrait several times and in several places, including Paris, where Oudry painted it in 1750" (Potterton 1977, p. 135).

As we know, culture contact is a two way street. This point is emphasized by another painting by Van Loo entitled "The Grand Turk giving a concert to his mistress" (1737) in which the party all sit wearing Western dress around a piano, much as others might have done in Paris or London. Such paintings show the spread of Western customs, while also encouraging discussion of the particular ways in which the West views other cultures and societies. It is this sense of analytical distance, of a sociological way of looking, that separates this method of using slides from art appreciation, another way of looking and knowing.

These are only a few examples among many possible, and all difficult enough to communicate without the evidence of the paintings themselves. I continued to experience a sense of intellectual satisfaction and delight, as examples appeared that perfectly illustrated a point, sharing in an historic context, and, in a curious way, validating the sociological theory. Students could literally see that the theory corresponded to a historic reality as communicated by the artist.

That I was in Europe when I began my collection was fortuitous, but hardly necessary for its development. Besides the major American collections, there are several other sources open to sociologists and several logical ways to proceed.

A first step would be to check with the university or college art department, which undoubtedly has a sizable slide library. While some librarians are reluctant to sign slides out to faculty outside their own department, more often they are willing to extend borrowing privileges to interested faculty. I have found slide librarians very helpful in directing me toward relevant slide examples. In a lecture leading up to Marx, for example, the librarian pulled out a collection of nineteenth century industrial architecture—old etchings and photographs of mills, factories, and coal mines. Of course, with such collections arranged by artist,

period, and/or country, the sociologist should have done his/her homework, reviewing art texts, especially those emphasizing the social context, for particularly telling examples.

With such works consulted, the sociologist can make use of a second source: reference guides to major slide collections. It is worth checking with both the reference and audiovisual departments. Two of the major guides are the *Directory of Art Libraries and Visual Resource Collections in North America*, which includes advice regarding circulation and purchase policies, and the more wide ranging *Index to Educational Slides* published by the National Information Center for Educational Media (NICEM).

The great advantage of a sociology department's purchasing slides over borrowing them from the art department lies in the greater control and accessibility. Individual slides should be indexed and organized according to sociological topic. This practice will make them accessible to all faculty without requiring an extensive knowledge outside their discipline. Ideally, a teaching guide should accompany each slide in each topical file. These guides would briefly explain the intellectual/artistic/historic context of each slide, while suggesting the sociological points that might be drawn from it.

THE "WHAT" OF SLIDE COLLECTION

Clearly, which slides are selected depends both on the courses for which they are to be used and what slide collections and libraries are available.

The slide files I created for Modernity and Identity follow the structure of the course. Briefly, they are as follows:

1. Culture contact and change: Focuses on how new technologies (printing press, navigational instruments, effective use of gunpowder) encouraged a process of contact through exploration, travel, diplomacy, and warfare, and what were the results in terms of new products and new ideas. Leads into discussion of the rise of science and the secularization of thought.

2. Concepts of the Self: Portraits reflect increased awareness of the self as separate from ascribed status, and variously highlight romanticism, authenticity, interest in psychological depth, and the perceived relationships between the individual and nature, the individual and society.

3. The Rise of Industrial Society: From Braudel's *longue duree* to Marx's revolution, how industrialization transformed the social landscape. Images of traditional countryside and people working in it, architectural monuments to industrialization (factories, mills, high gothic railroad stations), Daumier's class studies ("The Third class Carriage"), Edward Hopper's bleak

gas station, Lowry's images of industrial alienation and desolation ("Hillside in Wales," "Coming Out of School").

4. Urbanism: Architectural slides of the development of the European town. Paintings of old London (de Jongh 1630) contrasted with modern London. New forms of social life, entertainments, and attitudes as reflected in Impressionism. The American metropolis as viewed by Streichen, Hopper, Burra ("Harlem 1934").

Third World urbanization is viewed in a second collection begun with slides of West African cities. Differences in timing and context, the importance of the colonial past, of the present world system, are emphasized.

5. Gender: Two files have been initiated. One emphasizes gender appearances in portraits of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. A second shows how the nineteenth century doctrine of separate spheres shaped the Victorian home: from English country houses with rooms set aside for "gentlemen's activities" (smoking, billiards, keeping accounts) and for "ladies' activities" (sitting, sewing, chatting) to America's gothic cottages, showcases for female spirituality. Separate spheres are also reflected in the shaping of modern suburbia.

6. Ethnicity: Historic images of colonialism, slavery, immigration, segregation. For example: Barker's "Queen Victoria Presenting a Bible" (1861), Madox Brown's "The Last of England," Shahn's "Willis Avenue Bridge."

7. The Changing Family: Granges' "The Saltonstall Family" 1636-7 shows a man pointing to his dying first wife, while his second wife, with baby, sits nearby. Other portraits emphasize genealogy, descent, inheritance. More modern portraits reveal both the attenuation of the family and the emphasis on its psychological content; Degas' "Edmondo and Therese Morbilli" is one example. Other portraits develop other themes and attitudes related to social status and setting, from Stubbs' landed gentry, "The Milbanke and Melbourne Families," to Sickert's urban couple in "Ennui" 1914.

8. The Rise of Consumer Society: One file ties in with Veblen by presenting images of the class he was criticizing (John Singer Sargent is perfect here). A second file brings the theory up to date by presenting images drawn from contemporary advertising and by relating them to critiques of mass culture.

With the support of university resources, I hope to develop other files on topics, including politics and religion. In using this method, I have found that the quality and effectiveness of the presentation depends greatly on the quality and extent of the slide examples. It also depends on the research into the content and background of each slide. For example, I had in my

collection a slide of "Sir Brooke Boothby" by Gainsborough, in which a young eighteenth century gentleman is posed languidly and thoughtfully in nature, contemplating an open book lying beside him. I was planning to use this to illustrate a lecture on Rousseau's contributions toward the concept of the self. In particular, it visually, perfectly, matched a description provided by historian Robert Darn-ton on how eighteenth century people were advised to read Rousseau: "Take your book outdoors, where you can read it in the bosom of nature . . . But most important you should have the right spiritual disposition . . ." (1984, p. 243). Further research revealed that the young man pictured actually *was* reading Rousseau. Not only that, but Sir Brooke Boothby was, in fact, a great friend and patron of Rousseau's, in part responsible for the publication of one of his early works and a firm believer in Rousseau's ideas on man, society, and nature (Johnson 1986, p. 113). What students gained in the process was an understanding of the extent to which these ideas represented a break with the past, and also to what extent they derived from a mentality and climate different from our own, even as much as we have been influenced by them. In such instances, teaching guides are critical in reducing the repetition of background research and in drawing out such similarities and differences, such breaks, contributions, and continuities.

On the mechanical side, a multi-drawer storage cabinet with inset drawers is ideal for maintaining an orderly collection. This cabinet, with the slides themselves, represents a minimal investment for a department. The only equipment necessary is a slide projector and screen.

Making an initial collection available and accessible has acted as a seed collection. Other faculty have proved willing to contribute their own slides on appropriate topics. We've all begun to enjoy this new way of looking at pictures and buildings not simply as art, or even as social artifact, but as something that can add immensely to the learning experience.

STUDENT REACTION

My initial concern had been that students would find the slides alienating, that the introduction of art and architecture would make the sociological ideas appear more out of reach and incomprehensible rather than less so. As already suggested, student socio-economic status and subjects of study (engineering, science, psychology predominated) did not emphasize art appreciation as such, much less its applicability to the social sciences.

With such concerns in mind, halfway through the first term I asked students two questions:

"Do you think the use of slides adds to or detracts from the course content?", and "How do you think this method (of using slides) could be improved?" The response was gratifying. Out of the 20 students, all but one were very enthusiastic and thought the slides added to course content (the one dissenting student was noncommittal: "Having some visual context for the course does help, but the time might be better spent in other ways"). Typical responses from the other 19 included the following:

"The slides certainly enhance the whole course in general, giving a visual reference as well as a contextual reference for the time periods discussed."

"I think the slides add to the course. They give a much clearer picture of some of the things we discuss, and I find I remember much more if I see it than if I just hear about it."

"I believe that the use of slides adds to the course content because not only do we have examples of what you have been talking about, but you could also compare the slides with what you already have in mind."

Other students commented that slides added to their understanding because they perceived themselves to be very picture oriented, partly because of television; that the slides added a degree of realism and/or believability, because they did not have to rely only on later interpretations of the events and ideas of a given time, and because earlier periods were so intrinsically difficult for them to relate to that a picture was indeed worth a thousand words. "A lot of the time, since we were not around, what is being said seems unrealistic. It's almost like looking to the future because it's so hard to imagine."

Since this was the first year slides were being tested as a method, I especially appreciated student suggestions as to how the method might be developed. Several suggested presenting small clusters of slides, rather than whole lecture periods. In contrast to my fears of being too arty, others asked for more on the artists—"Greater elaboration of who painted the work or where it is from." But mostly they simply asked for more: more slides, more depth, more detail. "Possibly taking a single social thought and examining it through the works of different artists" . . . "Possibly by giving more examples of what everyday life was like in the time periods covered by the class" . . . "Should use slides more often" . . . "By somehow showing us in more detail the surroundings and the things that were going on while the people we are talking about were alive, their influences." Several stressed the importance of integrating verbal and visual: "As long as a presentation goes along with each slides, they are a good method. This way there is no misinterpretation of what the point is."

All points were well taken. In response, I have begun looking for ways to expand the collection, including exploring possible grant sources. I will also research teaching guides that coordinate verbal and visual presentations, and will make the collection more accessible to other instructors. Rather than being turned off by the art, students clearly communicated that the art helped turn them on to the sociology. Such was the initial idea, but I hardly predicted the enthusiasm with which the method was met.

GOALS

What is accomplished through introduction of this method? First, students have a better understanding of sociology because they can appreciate the historic context that gave rise to it. Most of these students are not sociology majors. Nor are they planning to go to graduate school, much less get a job teaching sociology to new cohorts of students. What they get from this method has more to do with the intrinsic satisfaction of holding ideas to light, of seeing how their different aspects are revealed through the combination of visual and verbal descriptions. This combination of arts and social science reveals that it was, and still is, possible to approach the social world with an interdisciplinary perspective.

Sociology for these students has become a way of looking and a way of knowing, rather than a peculiar vocabulary and conceptual tool kit to be accessed at term paper time. This method helps students understand both the way things were and the way things are. As we now recognize that there are different "modes" of learning and forms of intelligence, those students who follow a more visual "mode" have a new resource for understanding complex ideas. All come to recognize that sociology, like history, like art, has an aesthetic dimension. As Jacob Burckhardt once wrote, "I have done everything I possibly could to lead them on to acquire a personal possession of the past—in whatever form—and at least not to sicken them of it; I wanted them to be capable of plucking the fruits for themselves" (1960, p. xxi). Above all, this method helps prove the point that, despite the many ways through which the academic disciplines fight over turf, they describe one world. This important reminder helps all of us to adopt an ethic of responsibility toward it, surely one goal among many worth pursuing within the undergraduate sociology curriculum.

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