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## A TRIP INTO A LIFE OF VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

An interview with Douglas Harper

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# A TRIP INTO A LIFE OF VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

## An interview with Douglas Harper

**CHRISTINE LARRAZET :** At the very end of your book, *Visual Sociology*, you comment upon a picture taken by Gordon Park in the 1940s and conclude with these last words "This is, I believe, visual sociology". Could you relate how you came across this picture and why this picture, which has been taken by a photojournalist, encapsulates what is visual sociology ?

**DOUGLAS HARPER :** I used this photograph in a study of small dairy farms in US, post WWII.<sup>1</sup>

I think I made that statement because it struck me that the photograph seems to have no history and no context, but in fact, like all photos, it was made in circumstances that affected both what it says and how it communicates. The "first meaning,"—produced by how it was made—evolved as it was viewed across time and circumstances, including the use I made of it in my research.

I'll explain in more detail. The photo was made as part of a documentary project now referred to as the Standard Oil of New Jersey project (SONJ) directed by Roy Stryker, who had been the curator of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the 1930s. The history of the FSA is well known, of course, for it included the work of photographers such as Dorothy Lange, whose photo of the migrant mother is iconic, and Walker Evans, who bridged the boundaries between art and documentary. The purpose of FSA, however, had not been documentary; rather, it was to generate propaganda for Roosevelt's social and economic Depression era programs<sup>2</sup>. When the economy recovered due to war production in the late 1930s, the FSA was discontinued and Stryker was out of a job.

He was subsequently hired by Standard Oil of New Jersey to organize a documentary project on the general topic of "oil in the American way of life." This was not an altruistic gesture; Standard Oil had been labeled as traitorous for selling synthetic rubber to Nazi Germany in the buildup to war. As was the case with the FSA, the purpose of the project was ideological; to create a visual argument. The project became something quite different and became what I argued was an visual ethnography of everyday life. In other words Stryker used the sponsorship these projects offered to follow a vision that I think was close to what many visual sociologists now value.

Stryker had become interested photography as a way to teach economics to university students in the 1920s. He was friendly with Robert & Helen Lynd, who wrote *Middletown* <sup>3</sup>, published in 1929. *Middletown* was a study of early industrial capitalism in the U.S. and I think one of the greatest sociological community studies ever written. In any case, it was the Lynds who taught Stryker to think about documentary photography in a sociological way, and

this led Strkyer to develop what he called “shooting scripts;” guides born out of a sociological perspective about where to point the camera!

Stryker encouraged his photographers to photograph daily routines and events; normal places where the taken-for-granted was happening. Stryker admonished his photographers: ‘*Don’t photograph what is significant now, make photos of what will be significant in fifty years.*’ He had the idea that the camera in the hands of skillful photographers would reveal the rituals, events, objects and organizational lives that were central to what was ‘just there;’ imagining that one day we would find them useful and interesting, as I did.

I imagine a meeting of Standard Oil executives, sitting in room such as this, deciding to fund an expensive program that in the end produced little of what they were looking for. Some of the photos were published in a company magazine and a few ended up in high school textbooks, but most languished in a warehouse and were nearly thrown into a dumpster, until being rescued by the University of Louisville, where they are now archived, and understood to be an extraordinary vision into this era in the U.S.

I spent a week in the archive, going through most of the 67,000 photographs to identify about 200 that documented family dairy farms in the late 1940s and early 50’s. I was especially interested in how farmers “changed works”—which was what they called their informal cooperation. For example, each farmer milked their own cows, but they could not individually afford (nor would it make sense for them to buy) threshers to harvest grains, and so they ‘changed works’ to harvest with a rented thresher, and all the farmers needed labor harvest their corn and other crops. So they worked together in groups of about seven farms for several weeks a year. They did not exchange money, but it was precisely organized, as it was timed to the ripeness of crops. Changing works included eating together as the informal farm crew moved from one farm to another. So I suggested that “changing works” was a metaphor as well as a description of a rural system based on cooperation and informal exchange. I felt this was quite important, because it disappeared suddenly when a new stage of mechanization redefined agriculture in the 1950s, and with it, a whole way of living and working collectively disappeared with it.

So when I was interviewing farmers I asked: “Do you have photographs of the changing works?”

“Oh, no, no.”

“What was it like?”

“Oh, it was really important. We looked forward to it. But nobody thought to make photos of any of that; we might have a photo of a cow who gave us a lot of milk, or won an award at the State Fair... but we didn’t photograph our work.”

So when I found photos in the SONJ archive that showed the specifics of changing works; for example a photo by Sol Libsohn of seven farmers crowded around a table eating (Image 1), I felt like I had found ingots of pure gold.



Image 1 - Farmers around a table eating

Source : Sol Libsohn / © University of Louisville Library

Like most of these photos, it is beautifully made. He appears to have shot at f 16 on his square format Rolleiflex (80 mm lens, not very wide!). He used a flash, positioned to the side, and this allowed him to use the small aperture and to get depth of field sufficient to read the details of the room and the people. The farmers are carrying on as though he's not there. He's positioned himself above and behind the table, probably standing on a chair, and yet he's being completely ignored. When farmers saw this photo their reactions were vivid. Not just remembering what they had done on many changing works crews, but what it had meant. I based the book around these conversations, relating how the farmers remembered the past to the structural changes they were experiencing.

But what I love about the Gordon Park's photo that you asked me about (and sorry for the digression!) is that it portrays what Durkheim described as "mechanical solidarity"—a society where cohesion comes from homogeneity; shared work experiences, mutually understood difficulties, quite similar economic demands and rewards, and, as the photo shows, even extreme similarity in their personal appearances. It is in all the details; their postures, the way they button their shirts, their hats, the way they sit, everything. The solidarity is unconscious and the photos shows that their social positions were strongly etched on every facet of their beings.



Image 2 - Farmers

Source : Gordon Parks / © University of Louisville Library

The photo (Image 2) also records a momentary interaction. Gordon Parks was probably the first African American they had met. He is likely wearing a suit; he is a professional. He's shooting with a Rolleiflex, an impressive piece of equipment. But they don't seem to be looking at him out of curiosity; the photo seems to briefly interrupt a moment of normality. So the photo documents the farmers, beautifully framed in the square format of the Rolleiflex, but it also documents a moment that likely never happened before: an African American professional, standing above and photographing farmers relaxed in their poses. I'd like to read the photo to mean that rural northern people escaped the virulent racism of the era (at least in the South) but that would be a reach, of course. Still, they are cooperating.

**C.L. Out of the 67,000 pictures, how did you select the 200 ones you have used for your interviews on changing agriculture (Changing Works, 2001) ?**

**D.H.** I was looking for photos that showed the routines of the work and family life. I think that if I had another life I would go back to these archives to study other things. Because one of the things I noticed and eventually wrote about<sup>4</sup>—is that the documentary vision of these photographers appears to be at least partly gendered. I only had a week in the archives so I had to work fast. The names of the photographers were written on the backs of the images, and it was only their last names; at that point I did not know who these photographers were. So I just selected photos that were relevant to my study.

When I began studying the 200 pictures I discovered that two of the photographers in my collection were women. And then it became clear to me that the women and the men photographed the same topic, farming, in observably different ways.

**C.L. What was this gender difference in seeing or/and photographing ?**

**D.H.** We have equivalent photographers—except for their gender—given the same assignment. In this case, it is to photograph daily life; particularly dairy farming. They were family operations and so both men and women were part of the family labor force. But the men tended to take photos that were more individualistic, often isolating a particular farmer, often framed from below in what appears as a heroic pose. The men were pictured with their machines and what was going around the machines. The women tended to take photos of more collective activities; men working together; or women helping each other. Then again, this was not always the case. Some women were in the fields working with the men, and some women photographed men doing manual work in ways that were not distinctive.

But only women photographed farm women working at home, doing routine work like cooking and cleaning, and special work getting food ready for fairs; preparing jellies and jams, things to take to competitions, and things like that. The women found this noteworthy; apparently the men did not. Given how men tend to see women's work in the home in general, this would not be surprising. As I was studying these photos, I discovered who the women were, who the men were, and there were patterns.

**C.L. Do you mean that the women's vision was more inclusive ?**

**D.H.** Often, yes. They tended to show the groups more than the individuals; they were less likely to present the 'heroic pose' I mentioned earlier.

It would be interesting to go back into the archive, identify several topics that both men and women photographed, and see if men and women photographed them differently. It might mean photographing things that were simply visible to women and invisible to men, and it might also suggest a gendered way of organizing the frames; putting subject matter into a composition.

**C.L. Is this a study you plan to do ?**

**D.H.** Yes, in another lifetime. (Laugh) I would love to. The SONJ archive would be an idea place to do this, because the men and women were mostly on the same assignments and they had a great deal of freedom. One thing that would make it difficult, and also interesting is that some of the photographers, such as Gordon Parks or Esther Bubley had distinctive styles that don't seem to be about gender at all, but seem to reflect their own vision and practice.

**C.L. What first inspired you to combine sociology and photography ?**

**D.H.** I attended Macalester College in the late 1960s, an institution that was quite experimental. I was a double major in Fine Arts (with a focus on sculpture) and Political Science, an unusual combination. I went to India for seven months as a study-abroad experience after my second year, but I went actually to evaluate my anti-war sentiments in the context of actually experiencing Asia. I returned to the States more against the war than before I left, not surprising of course. But the larger purpose of that era in one's life is to define a purpose; a life goal. If you are lucky that happens, and in that way I was very lucky because it did.

I began to photograph seriously in India, and I began to imagine doing both photography and some form of social science. I had moved from political science to anthropology after India, but the visual anthropology I found was unreflexive, empirical and studiously uninspired, speaking of photography. This was before the work of David MacDougall and other more contemporary anthropological filmmakers and photographers. But it left me rather cold and didn't offer a path I wanted to follow.

I had two exhibitions from the India photos that opened some doors. As I mentioned, I had discovered documentary photography, which moved me greatly, but still left something missing. Documentary photographers were taking on social problems in a much more direct way than sociologists in that era. The turmoil of those times was deep; not just the war in Vietnam, but struggles for racial justice; the women's movement; corporate malfeasance, an emerging class analysis of America. Documentarians were on the front lines of all of these struggles and I wanted to be involved that way. But I didn't feel I could work in isolation from an academic orientation; there had to be some theoretical orientation. So in fact I realized couldn't be a journalist or a documentary photographer; my work had to be rooted in sociology. I was one of a handful of like-minded sociologists who felt this way and in the late 1970s we began what we now call 'visual sociology.'

**C.L. You have also developed a particular writing tone that blends a scientific, poetic and journalistic voices. How did you come to develop this particular voice ?**

**D.H.** I went to graduate school at Brandeis University in Boston, where the sociology department was both anti-establishment and anti-establishment-sociology! Herbert Marcuse had taught there and Angela Davis was said to have been a visiting professor (it is also possible that this was just part of the folklore of the place!). So the general tenor was to find a way to do sociology that confronted the 'myth of scientific objectivity' that lay behind the

quantitative methods that was then hegemonic and the functionalist theory that gave American sociology of that time its conservative cast. So it was a crazy place where we read Freud, Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, Gouldner, in addition to the standards ... and extremes of sociological approaches including ethnomethodology, immersive fieldwork and so forth. They convinced us that if you could make an argument for your approach you could do it. In fact our oral exams for our Ph.D. were based on an intellectual autobiography in which we had to defend whatever methods and theories we used in our dissertations. They also tended to accept students who were not part of the mainstream. So as a result there was a lot of creative work being done by my fellow students; we were not in a lockstep proceeding through the then typical march of quantitative sociology and watered down functionalism.

I had the wonderful experience of being the last Ph.D. student of Everett Hughes, who was then in his late 70's. He was a first generation Chicago School sociologist (Ph.D. in 1927 at Chicago) and had written many influential essays and a few books; and I found him to be very open to what I had in mind. I recently wrote an essay about being his student and it was special to read my notes from his class (which I still have) and my journals from those years. He wrote narrative reflections where he wove his sociological ideas into observations and examples. For me these essays were, and continue to be inspirational. So, if the professor could do it, why not us?

As I got into my fieldwork, Hughes encouraged me to write my dissertation as a narrative. It had a natural narrative shape: the tramp of that era lived in a series of events, working, drinking, travelling, and I just moved into that narrative (except for the drunks, which were often weeks long) and tried to capture that. And so my dissertation was quite long (it sorely needed editing!), and first half is written in the first person, a narrative of being on the road with the tramps I met and travelled with. My observations were constructed to emphasize sociological ideas I elaborated upon in later chapters. So the answer to your question would be that I was a product of my times; a rebel against the then-traditional (quantitative, functionalist) sociology, and I had the support to find my own vision and to try to realize it.

### **C.L. Did Everett Hughes explain why you should write like this ?**

**D.H.** No. He simply said, "Tell the story; don't overlook the details." He made this recommendation because it was how he thought and did sociology. He would observe people in various occupations handling crises, mistakes or disruptions and end up with a classic essay such as "Mistakes at Work" that brought sociological thinking into the very texture of institutional existence. So Hughes encouraged me to ask: 'what was routine for the men I studied, and how did they handle the crises, mistakes and failed dreams of their own worlds?' This was to be placed into the economic and structural changes that were redefining their worlds.

So my narrative begins in a freightyard in Minneapolis where there was a huge rail yard and a great deal of coast to coast freight train movement; a place where tramps had passed through for decades, usually on their way west. I met a tramp coming down from a three week drunk, and after being rebuffed by him, I snuck onto an empty boxcar on the same train heading to the agricultural harvests nearly two thousand miles west. We connected the next day; I had some food he was interested in sharing! We spent the next five weeks together (Image 3).



Image 3 - Extrait Douglas Harper, *Good Company: a Tramp Life*, 1982  
Source : Douglas Harper / © Douglas Harper

I had intersected a typical narrative: “*Finish your drunk; get on the train, go a long way under difficult circumstances (the trains were illegal and very hard to ride), find a job, make money, use it up getting drunk or get it stolen, and get on the train again*”.

The book *Good Company* (written from the dissertation) is a narrative that follows that story. I was inspired by Kerouac’s *On the Road* and other similar books of that post Beat era, including Charles Bukowski and Gary Snyder, to name a few. It was also the beginning of methodological experimentation in sociology but few did deep immersive fieldwork as I did, combined with photography and presented as a narrative. And I also remember that the Brandeis professors and my fellow students did not think it was particularly peculiar!

I wrote the dissertation into a book that was rejected by 17 publishers, during which I rewrote it several times. First I wrote it as a typically “scientific” ethnography, and I hated it. When it was all finished and typed I read it and pushed it off the table like it was a dead squirrel I’d found in the fireplace! (Laugh). I then went back to my original notes and I wrote it as I experienced it, and decided to do my best to follow my original vision.

And then the University of Chicago Press published it, and oddly enough it was well reviewed in the discipline and even in the popular press. I found out later that Howie Becker had been one of the readers for the publisher and his recommendation had been crucial. But the bigger point, I suppose that the imprimatur of the press legitimated it as sociology and so nobody said it wasn’t. In fact it has recently been released as a third edition.[5](#)

**C.L. You have related in your book how your very first immersion in homelessness in the 1970s in Boston impacted your work. What did you learn at that time that is still relevant today ?**

**D.H.** An anthropologist, James Spradley, saw photos I’d made in India and asked if I would do photos about homeless men for a book he planned to follow his masterpiece *You Owe Yourself a Drunk*. I was quite excited by this invitation, and also overwhelmed. I knew nothing about homelessness and was moving to Boston, which was a much tougher city than I’d ever experienced first-hand. I was intimidated by the homeless men I saw on the street but I took the plunge; I started photographing them. At first my whole point was to get a photo and to get out. I used two big noisy Nikons. I had a long lens on one, a wide angle on the other, and I went around looking like a war photographer. I worked in tough parts of the city (and Boston was a rough city, with racial tension, a lot of mob violence, and extremes of poverty and homelessness). I made photos guided by Spradley’s book; some were fairly interesting, but as a photographer I was intrusive and insensitive. I didn’t know these people; I didn’t get their permission. I often photographed people across the street with my telephoto lens. All I was doing was seeing the photos and releasing the shutter.

While I was working on this project, I met a heroin addict, Jesse, an African American man, and we became close friends; he moved to my little commune in Boston. He became something of a guide and protector. The project was moving along nicely, and then Spradley said, “I’m not going to do this book. But your photos are interesting so I encourage you to keep working on it.”

My friend Jesse then became addicted again and disappeared; a very difficult moment. A few months later I went to look for him by merging into the homeless scene in Boston for two weeks in mid winter. I just put on shitty clothes and got off the subway in the middle of the ghetto. I had a pocket full of change but nothing else, just my ID. I was in graduate school by that time and was inspired by Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*. In fact it was not hard to get by after a few days of learning the routine, aside from the cold and general fearfulness. But it was a remarkable experience to move into a completely different social role by just changing clothes and hanging out in a different place. I’ll never forget the first night in the mission; 200 men in beds eighteen inches apart, searing TB coughs crashing from one side of the huge room to the other; a large room with filthy rooms that were adjacent to an elevated metro and the trains appeared to bear down on us, just veering aside at the last minute.

I spent two weeks on the streets. By that time I had bought a ten-year old Leica, a small, quiet and unobtrusive camera. After I'd been on the street for about ten days I called a friend and asked him to fetch my Leica from my apartment. I put it into my pocket and carried it for a few days, and I took some photos in the mission where I was staying. Suddenly having a camera, even one that looked like a piece of junk (I had wrapped it with electrical tape), changed who I was; again, an important realization.

I realized from this experience that I had to be immersed in scenes I would study. I wanted to photograph from the inside looking out, not outside looking in. One camera, one or two lenses, and to only use it when I found something that spoke to a particular idea. I had this frame of mind when I was riding freights with tramps, which began the next summer.

I had made a transition from making the photo the point photographing to working with the camera to explore ideas. It is what I ask my students: *what is the idea that you are photographing? How can you explore that idea more effectively with different approaches and strategies as a photographer?*

### **C.L. Why did you come then to use photo elicitation? Was it to solve a particular problem ?**

**D.H.** I was working on a study of an auto mechanic who lived in an isolated region of northern New York; near a university where I had my first position. Willie lived on about \$7,000 a year and did pretty much what he wanted to. There was little bureaucratic regulation and a well-developed informal economy. Willie was a genius as a mechanic and even an inventor, and he didn't work for money. He had to make some, of course (he had himself and his family to support) but he was not motivated by it. I remember watching him do a complex job on an old piece of equipment for a farmer: "Willie, why did you spend three hours fixing this farmer's manure spreader? How much did you get for this?"

"Fifty bucks."

"How much is this transmission job half finished in the middle of the floor worth on which you have paid scant attention for these last couple of weeks?"

"Six hundred."

"Why haven't you fixed the transmission?"

"Because it is boring. I know how to fix the transmission. I was not sure I would be able to fix the manure spreader."

Willy was a special person but also not so untypical. I called him a *bricoleur*, in the sense of Lévi Strauss' writing in *The Savage Mind*, because he had many kinds of knowledge—knowledge of tools, techniques, materials—and he combined them in unusual ways.

At first I had a hard time making sense of it. I came across a book by John Collier called *Visual Anthropology*, the first text on the subject, and Collier described doing photo elicitation in the 1950's. Nobody had paid much attention to it and it had faded into obscurity. I do believe that *Working Knowledge*, the book about Willie, is the first book that is based on it.

What I realized while I was photographing Willie's shop that I was photographing it from what Becker would call "lay theory," that is, the public idea about a topic; taken for granted definitions. Even though I'm not trying to, I'll reflect those ideas as a photographer. I needed to escape that; to see, photograph and describe the shop from Willie's perspective.

**C.L. Would photo elicitation counteract preconceived representations? Our own lay theory ?**

**D.H.** I think so. It was my intension anyway. I've read a lot of elicitation studies and some are brilliant but many are not, however. I've come to see it more as an art than a science.

**C.L. Could you give an example of a particular insight that photo elicitation has given you and that you had not perceived through observation and photographing ?**

**D.H.** In the beginning the stuff around Willie's shop simply looked like piles of junk. I didn't know how to photograph or write about it. Then I came across the elicitation idea, and it seemed right for this project because the work was "observable" and because Willie was perceptive and interested.

Sometimes I tried to "break the frame" in a Husserl sense so Willie would suspend his own taken for granted perceptions; see what he was doing from a new angle or detail. I often used close-ups of his hands or even his fingers doing a delicate procedure on an old piece of machinery, or even holding a file correctly when sharpening a chainsaw. This led Willie to reflect on his mundane actions, things he had probably not verbalized before.

I was also interested in the detailed histories of particular jobs, trying to understand how everything fit together; the parts, the actions, and even, sometimes, some money. There is a photo might be an example that springs to mind (Image 4).



Image 4 - Extrait Douglas Harper, *Working Knowledge, Skill and Community in a Small Shop*, 1987  
Source : Douglas Harper / © Douglas Harper

I was watching Willie fashion a new front for a tractor he had been restoring. I had the general idea of why he had built the bumper for the tractor, but I didn't know where the parts or even the tractor had come from, and what role it would have in his life. I was watching him finish the job and in doing that he was trimming a delicate edge from the metal. Our interview with the photos from that day filled in that context. Why he had an odd shaped piece of metal, why he had the tractor, and why he is putting it together as he was.

There was one photo (the last photo on my 36 exposure roll of film and I didn't have an extra with me that day) that I didn't get at all, but I took it anyway.

Willie looked at it and said: "Well George Smith brought over a piece of a smoke stack from an old factory. He was going to make a wood stove; he got it half done and couldn't finish it. He owed me some money, so he gave me his half-finished stove, and the first thing I did was cut the top of it off because it had really an ugly cut, and that would show on the top of the stove I actually did make; it's in the back corner of the shop. I didn't want anybody looking at that thinking it was my work. So I used that piece I had trimmed off on my bumper and I was trimming it, just to make it look right."

This is just the tip of the iceberg. A story of the piece of an abandoned factory, Willie's work aesthetics; a system of barter and other forms of exchange, inspired by a photo. When we did the elicitation interviews he would realize that I didn't understand the background; that I'm a stranger to his world. We all think we are not strangers to each other's world to one degree or another, and sometimes photos can be bridges.

### **C.L. How do you choose the topics you research ?**

**D.H.** I study topics my values bring me to. Often trying to see "the other side"--not latent functions—but an underside of an issue that is sociologically interesting; maybe a bit ironic. Thus homeless men are purposeful rather than anomic, and workers rather than drunks; agricultural modernization is productively rich but socially irrational; Willie's poverty is the basis of a life lived exactly as he wanted it, and so forth. I care about communities, good food, welcoming cities, class oppression and so on (not a very original list!). Most recently I've been studying public art, which derived from a small study we did in Rome about the meaning of left-over fascist semiotics.<sup>6</sup> Here we combined photo elicitation (based on my photos of fascist public imagery remaining in Rome) with a survey. We arranged images in "scales" from connotative to denotative (connotative might be a building design that only a few would recognize as fascist and denotative would be an actual depiction of Mussolini—and there are several remaining in Rome). My partner on the project, Francesco Mattioli, had a team of three graduate students interview 600 randomly chosen Romans to see where and how they saw politics in these images, in the context of their own individual backgrounds. It was an interesting experiment and I like the potential to combine methods like this. But mostly I use photographs to make my own interpretative statements, especially about design and art in urban settings. It is also a great excuse to explore cities with my camera!

### **C.L. You have recently completed a movie *The Longest Journey Begins* with a professor of journalism, Maggie Patterson, in which you have combined a sociological perspective with a journalistic perspective. How did you manage to blend these two perspectives that you have previously described as very different? Can they be mutually complementary ?**

**D.H.** I am a sociologist because I appreciate how theory helps me understand the world. My colleague and friend Maggie is an investigative journalist. Her work, like all good journalism, is in-depth. A lot of journalists read sociology and certainly think in sociological ways. But at the end of the day they are under pressure to write accounts for the public that the public will read, and they are always under a time pressure, even investigative reporters who get much more time and freedom. So it is different from sociology but deeply related, of course.

Maggie and I have taught several university courses together and our goals, put simply, were to make our journalism students aware of sociological thinking and to encourage sociology students to write in a more vivid and interesting way. The film project came out of one of these courses.

For the movie, we were filming men in a halfway house, which is a place where men live after they have been in prison or if they have been in serious addiction. It would have been relatively easy to make a movie of "war stories", dramatic tales from addicted lives on the streets. And at first the journalism students tended to focus on these more exotic aspects of the life, in part because it was new to them to hear it from real people they are discovering it for the first time.

I said 'Let's study history of film first.' The instinct of the journalist students was to use a voiceover narrative. I asked: 'What do you or I know about this world sufficient to write this narrative?' The film that would result would likely be didactic and preachy, with a simple structure and would tidy up all the ambiguity in these lives. I suggested that we find a way to make a film that creates its narrative by connecting scenes, interviews and cutaways the way fiction film does. We used inter-titles (words on the screen) in several places to connect certain places, as well!

So we start filming in the halfway house; Maggie and I would ask: 'What are we going to film? What are the filmable things?' Guys sitting around, cooking food in the kitchen, talking to each other, interacting, joking; not very visual! We started filming, and we treated our video footage as data. We transcribed all 36 hours of footage, and we coded these conversations and analyzed our shots. We analyzed what we had learned, and that led us to our next filming strategies. Then the themes emerged from the information we were learning, a version of grounded theory.

Eventually the categories that we built the film around had to do with topics such as the rhetoric about recovery. How do these men talk about recovery? How do they learn to talk about it? In what situation do they talk about it? Another theme that emerged was the redefinition of identities. How do they maintain their sense of self even when they fail again and again? We could have made an entire film about brothers and sons. These men fail as fathers and their sons have tragic ends because of it, and they know it, they see it, they experience it. We decided the themes of the film from studying the words spoken, and the shots we recorded. But the larger idea is that we became students of this scene by filming it and then tried to structure the film to reflect what we learned. All this was new and it came from paying attention to what people said and did, whether it seemed like performance, rationalization or soul-searching.

### **C.L. A Final thought ?**

**D.H.** I'd like to end this quite special opportunity to reflect on my career by saying for me visual sociology is based on a dual passion for photography and sociology. I like to make photos. I still use a manual camera; a digital version of my first Leicas, and I still like to use it. What I see is influenced by sociology but it is more than that; it is an aesthetic experience. I want to make photos people want to look at as well as to learn from. Not everybody has this view of course! Visual sociology has become a nicely complex subfield, and I learn from

nearly all approaches I encounter. But in my case I am pleased to say that it still holds the pleasure of visual discovery embodied in photography itself. That's never lessened.

It is also remarkable that filming is now available to anyone with a camera and editing software. Filming and editing is also addictive; it draws you in. There are infinite ways to see and reconstruct a scene; it's both maddening and exhilarating. It seems a natural partner for the sociological imagination. So, it's a happy time, and a good time for me to look backwards and also forward to new work!

*Harper's major publications can be found on [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas\\_Harper](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_Harper)*

## Notes

1 Douglas Harper was then working on how farming was transformed by industrialization ("Changing Works: Visions of a Lost Agriculture" 2001). Douglas Harper used his own pictures with images of photographers such as Gordon Parks, Sol Libsohn, and Charlotte Brooks who had been documenting agricultural practices during the 1940s agricultural practices.

2 In 1935, President Roosevelt set up The Farm Security Administration (FSA) to help farmers through the economic crisis. FSA administrators thought that photographs of striving farmers would support New Deal relief legislation (<http://thegreatdepressionphotos.com/roy-stryker/>).

3 Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd. 1929. *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company. Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd. 1937. *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company.

4 Douglas Harper. 2003. "Framing Photographic Ethnography: A case study." *Ethnography* 4 (2), 241-266.

5 Douglas Harper. 2015. *Good Company: a Tramp Life*. London: Routledge.

6 Douglas Harper and Francesco Mattioli. 2015. *I Simboli del fascismo nella Roma del XXI secolo, cronache di un' oblio*. Rome: Aciraele. (*The Symbols of Fascism: Reports of an Oblivion*).

### POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

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