

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002)

*A Tribute and a Portrait*



**Pierre Carles, director, Annie Gonzalez and Véronique Frégosi, producers, *Sociology is a Martial Art* [English subtitled version of *La Sociologie est un sport de combat*]. Brooklyn and Paris: First Run/Icarus Films, VF Films and Pierre Carles (C-P Productions), 2001. VHS videotape. NTSC standard. 146 minutes.**

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This unique documentary film was made during three years by French director Pierre Carles, who followed Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) in various situations and contexts, from the prestigious Collège de France in Paris to various destinations in Belgium, Germany, Spain and even the Parisian suburbs, between 1998 and 2001. While discovering this fascinating man and his strong personality, we can understand how and why Bourdieu became the most famous French sociologist of the second half of the 20th century, and the most quoted social scientist on the Internet.

That two-and-a-half-hour film was initially produced and released in France late in 2001, under the title *La Sociologie est un sport de combat* ('Sociology is a Martial Art'). But for technical reasons, since all European videotapes are set in the SECAM or PAL systems, which are not compatible with the North American NTSC video standard, the original French version could only be used in Europe, until it became available in the North American standard (NTSC) through a re-release made by the New York distributors First Run/Icarus Films, in its original French version with English subtitles. There is no DVD version of it yet.

A living portrait, a thought-provoking document, *La Sociologie est un sport de combat* is the finest documentary a social scientist could ever dream of: we see Bourdieu in many situations, like conferences, on television programmes, on the street, with students, colleagues, secretaries and with countless interviewers. It is not made in any sense to show an idealistic portrait of a perfect scholar. There are no 'tributes' by selected complaisant colleagues, close friends or family members; on the contrary, we sometimes see a polemical Bourdieu being angry at some colleague in a public debate, or at some point insulting his arrogant secretary,

elsewhere replying to a provocative question from the audience that shows ignorance of social science in which 'a sociologist cannot stand such generalizations'. But we also discover a committed intellectual, a generous academic, who takes the time to give advice to students and to younger colleagues. For instance, 'you should publish books instead of articles', says Bourdieu to the young scholar Loïc Wacquant. In another sequence, we see Bourdieu teaching a lesson of sociology of art in a classroom, with slides of Manet paintings. At the end of a lesson with French undergraduate students, Bourdieu told them: 'Please write down for me what you did not dare say or ask me in class.' A funny moment occurs in another scene. After receiving an illustrated letter from filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, Bourdieu declares, humbly, that he does not see himself as a poet. Looking at the letter he just read, he admits with a little embarrassment: 'this is fine, very mysterious; but I don't understand the meaning of even one single sentence'.

The peculiar title of the film has to be explained, and comes from a sentence often repeated by Bourdieu during the 1990s, as a kind of motto about his discipline: 'sociology is a martial art' (*'la sociologie est un sport de combat'*) because it can be used as 'a means of defence', when one has to protect oneself while in the public sphere, but one has to learn it 'without the right to use it for unfair attacks' or for bad reasons, such as marketing strategies, political propaganda or persuasion. In that sense, Bourdieu wants to remind us of the ethical dimensions of sociological practice.

In the first sequence, Bourdieu is presented in a generous way to a group of American university students by Professor Edward Saïd, who introduces his guest speaker as 'the major figure in sociology'. In a following sequence, we see Bourdieu present (as a silent witness) in a street demonstration (perhaps in Grenoble) against globalization; there, a woman who acts like a sports fan recognizes him. Later, during a radio interview, he defines sociology in his own words, as a discipline that 'tries to establish laws, to understand regularities, behavioural systems, and to define principles.' But he also comments on his own theoretical perspective in some specific terms: 'social world is not in a state of perpetual change; constants are the basis for understanding'.

This rare audiovisual encounter with a well-known social scientist is very interesting from many points of view. Listening to Bourdieu in a casual conversation is not like reading him. He often speaks with his hesitant, short phrases, in which he repeats himself and constantly reformulates his ideas, in sharp contrast with the long sentences that are the trademark of his written style. However, the documentary should not be seen as a biographical portrait of Pierre Bourdieu. Only a few furtive details are given about his private life: his military service in the French army, the years that he spent in North Africa in the 1950s, his first literary influences (such as Claude Lévi-Strauss's book *Tristes tropiques*). Here and there, Bourdieu comments on his own childhood and his early years. For instance, to illustrate the concept related to the transmission of cultural capital, which contributes to social reproduction, he mentions his refusal to use the southern accent that he inherited from his family from the region of Béarn. He recalls his rejection of the 'Occitan' vocabulary of the region where he was born, and even confesses his disdain for artists of that area. I suspect a French singer such as Claude

Nougaro could be a target of Bourdieu's criticism. While discussing his concept of 'symbolic violence', Bourdieu does not hesitate to introduce a reflexive form of self-criticism, when he mentions his own prejudices and some of his own false reasoning as examples of inner contradictions that sociology ought to explain. Scholars must be reflexive in their thinking, as Michel Foucault was in his way.

Those who are familiar with Bourdieu's work will, of course, recognize many of his ideas, when he said: young sociologists who are looking for a job only have two choices today: either to work in fine conditions, responding to the 'social demand', focusing only on specific topics chosen by the institutions that offer essential financial support, or to remain free and do their research on relevant matters (that they choose without any external pressure) and do social theory, getting neither payment nor recognition, like artisans. He also tells about his own method of writing his books – writing without interruption. He insists on the importance of writing for long periods, without stopping in the middle of an idea or a demonstration, to avoid losing important insights. As he often wrote in his early books, Bourdieu also explains that it is the transmission of cultural capital that makes social reproduction possible. In another place, he refers to his concept of masculine domination, one that he elaborated in one of his last books.

This fine presentation refers as well the work of other sociologists. In fact, Bourdieu does not speak a great deal on his own work, even though he has produced more than 30 books. He often quotes books and publications by colleagues from France and United US, among them Frédéric Lebaron's (2000) study of ideology, writings of the recipients of Nobel Prizes in economics, or Abdelmalek Sayad's (1999) book *La Double Absence*, about the problem of the non-integration of North African immigrants in France in recent decades.

There is an interesting scene taken from German television when Bourdieu enters into a dialogue with the famous novelist Günther Grass, about the current neoliberal trend in Europe, which can be compared to the conservative revolution that occurred in Germany during the 1920s. Both authors agree in their critique of capitalism, which is now called neoliberalism. Even today, Bourdieu argues, 'regression is presented as if it is progress; which is done by so-called socialists'.

The film ends with an animated discussion, when Bourdieu faces an audience that includes a large proportion of young African immigrants in a cultural centre located in the poor suburbs around Paris. Some young Algerians are especially aggressive and refuse any dialogue with the guest speakers; trying to disturb the lecture, they even reject Bourdieu's presence and ideas. There is much tension and confusion in the crowd. Some want to learn about their own situation and some radicals do not tolerate anything that comes from the French institutions. At some point, a leader in the crowd says that opponents to the French regime should try to read books, for instance those written by Bourdieu, which deal with symbolic violence and power structures, in order to understand their own situation and position. In his reply, Bourdieu shows he is upset, but he patiently refers to some recent sociological publications about the situation of immigrants in France, and then concludes in terms that brook no opposition, addressing the most radical Africans present directly: 'If you refuse to read, you are bloody stupid.' The English subtitles are a shade more polite than the French words used by Bourdieu: 'Si vous refusez de lire, vous êtes des cons.'

There are very few occasions for encountering a famous French sociologist on video and this one is an experience. I think *Sociology is a Martial Art* is an important document that should be seen by every sociologist, specially younger ones. However, this exceptional videotape is not the only audiovisual document about Pierre Bourdieu: there was also a controversial lesson on television and journalists that was produced in France in 1996 by director Gilles L'Hôte, which was released in two one-hour parts, titled *Sur la télévision* and *Le Champ journalistique et la télévision*; both essays were published in English translation (Bourdieu, 1998), but are not easily available on video outside France.

The film *La Sociologie est un sport de combat* was a huge success in France. The video remains available as well in Europe in its original French version (without subtitles), in the SECAM system. It was aired on French television and used on many occasions after Bourdieu passed away, in January 2002. It was even screened in Parisian repertory theatres and on French campuses. Many pedagogical uses are possible. For teachers and academics, that videotape could be used to show what sociology is all about. In social sciences circles, it would show how a sociologist works (and what he does), although Bourdieu is a special case of an academic. He gave countless interviews, lectures and lessons, and this is not usual in any academic's everyday life.

This video could be helpful in other disciplines as well. In courses that deal with cultural studies, this document could highlight the constant references to power, social control, resistance and gender issues that are part of everyday life. In seminars in education, people will discover an exceptional teacher and a subtle communicator. For students and teachers in French studies, it brings some good examples of how French society works, from the interpersonal dynamics in a famous Parisian research centre, with odd relationships between colleagues and secretaries. In my opinion, *Sociology is a Martial Art* is a vital documentary that should be part of every college or university library. It will be easily comprehensible to undergraduate students, and quite useful in various courses in social sciences.

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