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## **An interview with Sarah Pink. FROM VISUAL METHODS TO FUTURES ANTHROPOLOGIES**

Sarah Pink, Alba Marín, Jacques Ibanez Bueno

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DES

# [ MÉTHODES ] VISUELLES ]

IMAGES INTERACTIVES ET  
NOUVELLES ÉCRITURES

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## Images interactives et nouvelles écritures

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Jacques Ibanez Bueno et Alba Marin

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# SOMMAIRE

## INTRODUCTION

<b>Jacques Ibanez Bueno, Alba Marín</b> , <i>Un mouvement émergent pour de nouvelles écritures interactives</i> .....	9-24
---	------

## DOSSIER

Coordonné par Jacques Ibanez Bueno et Alba Marin

<b>Jacques Ibanez Bueno, Alba Marín</b> , <i>Présentation du dossier</i> .....	27-46
<b>Sophie Gébeil</b> , <i>Écrire l'histoire à l'ère des narrativités numériques</i> <i>Fos 200 : un documentaire sur deux siècles d'histoire industrielle, sociale et environnementale de Fos-sur-Mer / Étang de Berre</i> .....	31-50
<b>Jarret Geenen, Tui Matelau-Doherty, Sigrid Norris</b> , <i>Visual transcription</i> <i>A method to analyze the visual and visualize the audible in interaction</i> .....	51-80
<b>Julien Thiburce, Nicolas Guichon, Justine Lascar</b> , <i>Documenter les entretiens déambulés</i> <i>Interactions filmées et interactivité filmique</i> .....	81-98
<b>Jordan Fraser Emery</b> , <i>Dispositif immersif en contexte queer</i> <i>Entre 360° et réalité virtuelle</i> .....	99-122
<b>Victor Fajnzyblber, Francisco J. Gutiérrez, Paulo Barraza, Pablo Riveros, Javier Moyano, Mateu Sbert</b> , <i>La mirada inmersiva</i> <i>Estudio transdisciplinar de la inmersión en realidad virtual interactiva</i> .....	123-142

## VARIA

<b>Émilie Balteau</b> , <i>Le sociologue et le sensible</i> <i>Écrire la sociologie en images</i> .....	145-166
<b>Jeanne Drouet</b> , <i>Les images au labo</i> <i>Les méthodes visuelles à l'échelle d'un laboratoire de sociologie</i> .....	167-186

## ENTRETIEN

<b>Jacques Ibanez Bueno, Alba Marín</b> , <i>From visual methods to futures anthropologies</i> <i>An interview with Sarah Pink</i> .....	189-196
---	---------

## PERSPECTIVES

<b>Olivier Traverse, Claire Soubrier</b> , <i>La plastique du réel</i> .....	199-218
--	---------

## ALTERNATIVES

**Pierre Gély-Fort**, *The dark LOVE BOAT* ..... 221-222

## TIRÉ À PART

**Joyce Sebag, Jean-Pierre Durand**, *La sociologie filmique*  
*Chapitre 4. Le cinéma exacerbe les interrogations sociologiques* ..... 225-232

# FROM VISUAL METHODS TO FUTURES ANTHROPOLOGIES

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH PINK

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Sarah Pink  
(© Sarah Pink).

### BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Pink is professor and director of the Emerging Technologies Research Lab at Monash University, Australia. Sarah is a design anthropologist whose work includes blending visual and design ethnographic practice in dialogue with theoretical scholarship, to produce both academic and applied outcomes. Her book *Doing Visual Ethnography* was published in its fourth edition in 2021.

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**JACQUES IBANEZ BUENO & ALBA MARÍN:** For first off, we are going to talk about visual methods. First of all, what do you think about this expression?

**SARAH PINK:** That's an interesting question. I thought about this question when I wrote my book *The Future of Visual Anthropology*, because in many ways, visual anthropology isn't only visual now, since it's about the visual, it's about sounds, it's about the whole sensory experience. We've been talking about visual methods for years and years and they've always referred to something beyond just the visual, which is the relationship between visual and sound vision and embodied experience. That is, all of those things involve the relationship between the visual and other senses. So, when we use the term "visual methods", we actually know that we're referring to something beyond the visual. And also, I think that the term visual methods not only invokes methods in media that involve the other senses, but it also invokes important questions around ethics, around what can be seen and what can't be seen, what can be known and the different forms knowledge takes. The label "visual methods" has come to be a reference for such a large body of kind of work and questions in our field of practice, that we need to keep it. But that doesn't preclude us from using other terms.

I guess the way I try to delineate it is that if for example I am working on a book about visual ethnography, then my key interest in that book is really visual lens-based practice. The title of the book emphasizes the visual, but my focus within that is on the use of digital and analogue photography, and video, and obviously also on ethnographic practice. So, although my book is called *Doing Visual Ethnography*, it refers to something that's delineated within the book itself. I've just published the fourth edition of *Doing Visual Ethnography*, and writing it was a really exciting process because the book has evolved over each edition. The fourth edition engages more with the digital materiality of photographic and video practice and introduces a future focused visual ethnography practice. It also discusses how visual practice can help us to contest, for instance technologically determinist narratives about futures. Visual practice in visual ethnography can branch into a whole range of different domains and the methods it involves inevitably won't be exclusively visual.

**JIB & AM:** You have published a state of the art of visual methods in the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries with several methodological books

and articles such as "Interdisciplinary Agendas in Visual Research: Re-situating Visual Anthropology" (2003) or *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research* (2001). For this 21<sup>st</sup> century, could you summarize your last 20 years of practice and tell us your opinion on the community of researchers who claim to use these methods?

**SP:** Oh, that's super interesting! Yes, I think it's gone in stages. And this is, from memory rather than just doing a systematic review, but I think for me it started with the push to use photography and video in qualitative research, especially in anthropological and sociological research and just the push to use those visual technologies and the ambition for it to be taken seriously. I think for me that was the first stage about 20 years ago.

When I wrote my visual ethnography book, I had no idea that so many people would read it, or that 20 years later I would be publishing the fourth edition. The first step was to get visual methods really firmly on the agenda, for them to be taught more widely in universities, for funding organizations to acknowledge that they were proper research methods and to get visual research projects funded. My first visual projects were certainly not funded by academic research councils. It was very difficult to get national research councils to fund that kind of work 20 years ago, whereas now nearly all of my projects, whether they're funded by industry partners, by public sector or a National Research Council, include visual methods. And nobody challenges the idea that visual research methods are valid anymore, but 20 years ago they were frequently criticized and contested and not taken seriously. The next step that evolved, was the focus on digital methods, where digital video and photography and Web based visual research practice became established, and since then has of course moved on from CD-ROMs to DVDs, to Web based materials, to the more complex digital context we have now. Another step it was the sensory turn, whereby we started to account for how the visual was part of our sensory experience and the embodied and more performative dimensions of visual research came to the fore. Key initial influences in this field have included the work of Marcus Banks and Gillian Rose's earlier work on visual methods and Christine Hine's work on virtual methods, which I think really set the scene at the turn of the century.

For me particularly the turn to applied visual research has also been a significant step. Applied

research was also often seen as something that wasn't real proper academic research at that time. Part of my agenda has been to challenge this, to ensure that applied research and academic scholarship are considered to be part of the same activity. Visual ethnographic methods play an important role in this since they enable us to do and say things in applied research settings, and to public and industry audiences in ways that we really couldn't if we did not have visual technologies and content. The applied focus has become increasingly important since around the middle of the first decade of this century. This, along with the growth in digital methods has really impacted on both how we can undertake and present visual research.

It is also essential to account for how the smartphone has emerged as a technology in research, to record doing research, but also to share materials, find information, and also to share our work when we publish it. The smartphone has been integral to the way that these research methods have evolved. And as we become increasingly digital and connected, then such technologies and the roles they have in research, and the apps available for visual research, editing and for sharing visual materials, have also shifted the possibilities for doing visual research. We are in a really interesting technological context as regards visual technologies, the ways that they could be used creatively in research and in publication and sharing and representing our work on that practical level. But also, we're in a really interesting context, theoretically in academia. The theoretical paradigms that we're dealing with now do really kind of enable us to understand that *the digital and the material and the human and the organic and the environment* is actually all part of the same configuration. And to understand the relations between those things and in more advanced ways than we had available to us 20 years ago as well. There are four aspects: the technological advances; the theoretical advances; the turn to the sensory; and the interventional and applied possibilities. Here, research itself is not just about discovery and academic publication, instead it is involved and engaged in the world.

**JIB & AM:** Reading recent scientific articles, we find a lot of reference to "Walking video" (2007). What do you think about the modernity of your contribution?

**SP:** It's interesting! It's one of my most cited articles, published that in 2007, that's 13 years ago now.

It's actually still one of my favorite articles. It was something I'd been thinking about for some time before I wrote it. I gradually realized the significance of walking with others and the significance of video in that process, how video was so much part of that engagement with both people themselves and with their relationships with their environments. That article is still quite foundational for me when I write other pieces about methodology, since I understand movement as being fundamental to the way that we engage with the world, how we engage with other people, and how we learn and come to know in the research process. The first edition of my book *Doing Sensory Ethnography* was published in 2009, just two years after that article, but the foundational thinking about how the place is part of our ethnographic practice and how we actually constitute a place as we do research, as we engage with our participants, started to emerge at the same time as the article.

If we see the ethnographic place as the site of ethnography, this involves understanding it beyond simply being the fieldwork site, but also the site of analysis, the site of sharing and where the other kind of constituents of the research process come together. A theory of place would seem to me to be very appropriate to understand that moving kind of context. So the ethnographic place is an environment that different types of things and materials of different kinds of different qualities and different speeds and different meanings, move through and around. Together they constitute the materials and experiences we might know, feel and share with others as researchers. The ethnographic place is also the site where other people join that process, learn with us and take that knowledge with them to other places. So in that sense the theoretical underpinnings of "Walking with Video" expanded into other work.

"Walking with Video" has also been foundational for me as a way to understand how we as researchers and participants move together and in relation to video, and the ways of knowing this invokes. While the ideas discussed there were built on my slow city research, and walking in a community garden, much of my other work involved walking around homes with people. Then there are situations where I can't actually necessarily accompany the participants myself. So with three colleagues, we did some cycling ethnographies of people cycling through their cities and we asked them to wear

GoPro cameras because we couldn't cycle with them. Some of them would be much too fast for us anyway. We use this cycling with video approach to understand how they were situated in the world as they moved, and to bring their experiences as they cycled into interviews. I developed a similar method with colleagues in Brazil who used GoPro cameras to work with people as they drove across big Brazilian megacities. Again in ethnographies of driving with other colleagues I've video record of people as they drive. There are in fact so many different ways in which you might manifest a driving with video approach with different technologies, different ways of different forms of mobility and different participants. And also, depending very much on the particular context you're in and where it's safe and where it's practical to actually video people and how you might best do that in different environments.

**JIB & AM:** You were a pioneer when you had designed the website about digital and visual methods *The Visualizing Ethnography*. What do you think about visual and interactive methods (digital-visual excluding research documentary)? On the relationship between interactivity and visual.

**SP:** Yes. So it's funny that you mention *The Visualizing Ethnography* website which was such a long time ago and. Yes, it's nice to remember that, because I hope that it did bring some people to visual methods and bring people together. The way that we could interact with those kinds of websites is just so different to the way that we can interact with contemporary digital visual technologies.

A key focus in more recent years has been on making *short documentary clips* as well as longer *design anthropological documentaries*. For example, the co-directed (with Nadia Astari) documentary *Laundry Lives* has a website – [laundrylives.com](http://laundrylives.com)<sup>1</sup> – with six short video clips which have been taken from the documentary, what I call *incisive clips*. The idea of an incisive clip is to actually say something short and incisive that will enable people to think differently. We might challenge their assumptions and that's the idea behind those clips. Something in it might surprise the viewer, might challenge them. That's one of the practices I've been developing over the last years. This includes a page of clips from my *Energy and Digital Living* website<sup>2</sup>. There are more than 30 video clips from that project which were developed collectively with the research team. The

clips are shown in seminars, events or to industry partners, again, to try and jolt people's thinking a little bit and surprise people. We've also developed incisive clips from research we've done about driving ethnographies around self-driving cars. While the longer video documentary which can be screened at film festivals is still important. The incisive clip is different, it is short and accessible, it can be shown easily online, it can be comfortably watched on a smartphone, laptop or tablet. The incisive clip involves thinking about how we engage with people in ways that are easy and simple for them to connect to. VR or AR are other possible options, but really they are much more complex when it comes to engaging a wider audience. Incisive clips provide this accessibility, for instance when I want a research partner to engage with my work – for instance by learning about participants' experiences through the really direct immersion that video offers, or by gaining a sense of the surprising findings that emerge through ethnography, when it reveals what's usually hidden. I also want my work to be accessible to diverse groups of people internationally, who might have different degrees of access to and modes of accessing the Internet.

**JIB & AM:** We have a big problem because a lot of visual works are technologically obsolete. Examples: website or *Cultures in Webs* CD-ROM designed by Roderick Coover. We think it's necessary to build a history of digital methods and a dedicated museum. Do you think it is necessary?

**SP:** Yes, I think that would be beautiful. I think for visual researchers, a museum of the technologies that we've used, the materials we've produced and projects that have become possible and evolved over those years would a fantastic way of telling our story.

Much of my work has become obsolete due to the changes in technology. And I've never saved my work in advance. So I have my still photography, my printed photographs from the early 1990s. Then I have a big gap. Until I get to the visual work that I have created in the last few years now. Having said that do think that some of the work I developed, say between 1999 and 2010 has something of a shelf life, as we say in English. So it doesn't worry me enormously that. It isn't available, since the work I am producing now builds on the ideas that it developed. I've started to see my work as potentially only lasting a certain time, and I would

imagine that in 10 years' time people won't be looking at the work that I'm doing at the moment. I think it's very interesting to consider what kinds of products we value and the things that academic culture encourages us to keep. For instance, our printed books and completed ethnographic films tend to be transferred to new technologies, so we have e-books or digital versions of old books, and films saved in new formats. Those finished works tend to have a particular status as publications, whereas my CD-ROMs and DVDs and websites were more transitory in terms of their role in the research and dissemination process.

I think it's very interesting that you've asked that question, because it demands that we reflect on what we value, and why we value it, and why we should. I think it demonstrates that we tend to always value the product over the process, however much we emphasize the process, it's the process that we tend to lose and the product we tend to keep for longer.

**JIB&AM:** You talk about the need for interdisciplinary research; you talk about giving in and breaking some rules of traditional anthropology. Do you think it may also be necessary for social sciences?

**SP:** This really is one of the underpinning points of my futures approach to social sciences. The social sciences have a really important role to play in the future of our society. I think we have a critical role to play, especially against narratives of technological determinism, the kind of predictive approaches to the future that might be made by economists, by engineers, by quantitative scientists, uses of big data automation and so on, in our contemporary context. But the social sciences have tended to research things that are happening at the moment or things that have already happened. We need to start working in a future space because that's the only way that we can effectively participate in interdisciplinary debates about our futures. I believe we need to complicate and modify the kinds of predictive approaches to futures that have been taken by other disciplines, in ways that are critical but above all that is truly collaborative.

Visual methods have a really important role to play in that context, firstly because they enable us to look at the kinds of visualizations of futures made by other disciplines and critique them based on research. For example, in an article that I wrote

with two of my colleagues from Sweden, Vaike Fors and Thomas Lindgren (2017), we used our research about how people keep their cars at the moment as a way of contesting the future visions of self-driving cars. So our argument was that future visions of self-driving cars are actually of clean cars where people are sitting there wearing smart clothes and having business meetings. Everything's clean, everything is organized and beautiful! If you look at what people's real cars are like, people's real cars are full of things. They've got children's toys and crumbs of food all over the back seat. They're untidy. They're messy. Why the car of the future would be any different? Why would it always be super clean and full of business professionals having meetings? We need to critique those visions of the future, and visualizations of the future, and say, well, what do we really think that the future will look like in the complexities of people's future lives? And how would it appear? Visual images enable us to communicate directly about these kinds of human experience. I think visual methods should be part of any interdisciplinary research agenda for those reasons, because they really help us to make these direct contributions.

**JIB & AM:** In your recent article "Automated Futures and the Mobile Present: In-car Video Ethnographies" (2017) we can read: "*We move beyond the focus on the observable and spoken towards asking what we can learn from being and driving with people, and propose an interventional team-based video ethnography which is responsive to the technological cycles of product design and prototyping, for making long-term anthropological ethnography possible.*" Could you tell us about the case *Future urban mobilities: A human Approach* and the theoretical-methodological approach?

**SP:** I work on this set of projects with my colleagues from Halmstad University and Volvo Cars in Sweden, as part of a long collaboration particular with Vaike Fors at Halmstad. On the website<sup>3</sup>, we have presented many materials from these projects. They demonstrate how we did the ethnography, how we created the workshops and ethnographic and translation materials we use in our interventional approach. In that particular project, we created the short video clips, which are shown on the website and my colleague Katalin Osz created a comic strip of a particular of a journey which was used in workshops. We also created the autonomous driving futures cards. Making design

cards from ethnographic research is an interesting interventional device, which like the incisive video clips is intended to surprise, or ask people to think differently, to shift their perspective, or to see somebody's else's perspective.

**JIB & AM:** In the French academic context, we have some difficulties with the relationship between art and social sciences. What is your own point of view about this, the chairmanship of the social sciences?

**SP:** I think that there should be a relationship between arts and the social sciences. But it is likely to be more complicated depending on where you are positioned in the social sciences. The quantitative social sciences are very different from the more creative and qualitative social sciences. My own work is closer to the more creative edge of the social sciences. I would locate most my current work as design anthropology, and I see my visual research practice as a form of what I call a *blended practice*, which blends documentary, design and ethnographic practice. I think that we need to open the social sciences to the arts, to design and to documentary practice. And in doing so, the social sciences sometimes have to let go of some of their principles, because in order to learn more, or move into a new space you have to cede to the occupants of that space to a certain extent. I believe there is an interesting tension there, since if the social sciences are to achieve, learn and how more then they will need to open up to other disciplines, while they simultaneously need to maintain their disciplinary identities and commitments.

**JIB & AM:** Concerning your recent academic activities, could you summarize the term *anthropology of the future* and the opportunity of innovative methods for social sciences?

**SP:** I prefer to use the term futures anthropologies. There's no one future, there's no one anthropology, and there's certainly not one single anthropology of the future. My work in that area is really situated within the work of the Future Anthropologists Network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). Some years ago, 30 of us got together to collectively write our ten points manifesto, published in our edited volume about anthropologies and futures. It's very interesting is that the four of us who edited the book are all visual anthropologists in some way or other: Juan Francisco Salazar, who is an anthropologist and documentary

filmmaker; Johannes Sjoberg, a filmmaker who is involved in visual anthropology; Andrew Irving, who has been the director of the Granada Centre of Visual Anthropology at Manchester University; and myself. Visual anthropologists have always been open to the interdisciplinarity, because we engage with visual and media theory and practice.

Futures anthropology involves thinking about our research as something that reflects not only on what's already happened and what's happening at the moment, but of the possibilities of what could happen. This opens up the ideas of anthropologies of possibility, or imagination, which involves not only researching what people say about the future, but how people feel about and sense possible futures. So how can we imagine our possible futures in our bodies? What is our sensory experience of imagining futures? I think the way that we imagine the future is embodied and sensory and may involve feelings we cannot express verbally. Returning to my "Walking with Video" article, the participant I write about there at one point showed me how he imagined a path being built in the future by performing it. He walked the future pathway and stretched out his arms to show me where it would be. That was a decisive moment, since it enabled me to think about how people imagine and show their futures in ways that might be embodied rather than spoken.

I've already talked about the idea that we need to do futures anthropology in order to contest some of the dominant narratives about our futures. At the moment we're also living in a situation where there's a political crisis, there's an environmental crisis, the climate change crisis, there's also a public health crisis and there's an economic crisis which is emerging in relation to all of those. Social scientists need to participate by developing a futures approach through which we participate somehow working towards ethical and equitable futures. We shouldn't just leave it to the economists, the engineers, the policymakers and the business strategists to consider how to shape the future of a world that's currently in a terrible crisis. We need to actually find our own way into that process as well. And I believe that visual research methods can contribute to how social scientists can become engaged and involved.

## JIB & AM: It's time to finish! Other points to share?

**SP:** The main point that I would share is that, when I wrote the second edition of *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2007), my practice was already very different from when I published the first edition in 2001. As an anthropologist, early in my career I often worked alone or with one other colleague at the most. In the subsequent years, I started to collaborate in teams, and most of the projects I have mentioned in this interview have involved teamwork. This is quite dynamic as different people make different contributions, ideas and methods from one project might travel to and be modified in the next project. One of the most interesting and exciting things I've found is that the video tour methods and the "Walking with Video" methods I used in my earlier projects working along, have developed further in new projects, through the innovations of new colleagues, in using new technologies, and of course also under the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Thanks for the preparation and technical support: Nicéphore Ibanez Coiron.

## REFERENCE LIST

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## NOTES

1. See the Laundry Lives website: <https://www.laundrylives.com>.

2. See the Energy and Digital Living website: <https://energyanddigitalliving.com>.

3. See the website's project: <http://aha.hh.se>.