The Future of Visual Anthropology

Engaging the senses

Sarah Pink
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The explosion of visual media in recent years has generated a wide range of visual and digital technologies which have transformed visual research and analysis. The result is an exciting new interdisciplinary approach of great potential influence in and out of academia.

Sarah Pink argues that this potential can be harnessed by engaging visual anthropology with its wider contexts, including:

- the increasing use of visual research methods across the social sciences and humanities
- the growth in popularity of the visual as methodology and object of analysis within mainstream anthropology and applied anthropology
- the growing interest in ‘anthropology of the senses’ and media anthropology
- the development of new visual technologies that allow anthropologists to work in new ways.

The Future of Visual Anthropology offers a groundbreaking examination of developments within the field to define how it might advance empirically, methodologically and theoretically, and cement a central place in academic study both within anthropology and across disciplines. This book will be essential reading for students, researchers and practitioners of visual anthropology, media anthropology, visual cultural studies, media studies and sociology.

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This book covers a series of different research projects I have been involved in and reviews the work of many other academic and applied researchers. To develop it I have relied on the good will, commentaries and collaboration of many people. For permission to reproduce images from their own work or archives thanks to: Malcolm Collier and the Collier Family Collection for supplying images from John Collier Jnr’s fieldwork in Alaska and Peru; the New York Academy of the Sciences for the use of images from the work of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead; and International Film Seminars, New York for supplying the image from Flaherty’s Nanook of the North. For allowing me to use screen captures of their work, or from projects owned by them, thanks to: Susan Tester and her research team; Rod Coover; Jay Ruby; Nelle Steele and Tracey Lovejoy at Microsoft; and Unilever Research.

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Responsibility for the argument and any errors in this book is, however, my own.
During the last five years I have been thinking through, writing on, and exploring through practice a series of issues related to how visual anthropology is situated (and mis-situated) in relation to mainstream anthropology and in wider inter- or multidisciplinary contexts across the social sciences and humanities. This has involved exploring four key themes: the interdisciplinary context of the use of visual methods, the implications of an anthropological theory of sensory experience for visual anthropology, the application of visual anthropology outside the academy, and digital media and the development of hypermedia anthropology. In the course of these explorations I came to see these themes as being unavoidably interconnected, both embedded in and constitutive of the contemporary context that a visual anthropology for the twenty-first century both shapes and is shaped by. This book aims to make these connections and interdependencies explicit by drawing together new work with rewritten versions of articles published elsewhere and unpublished conference papers. Not initially conceived as part of this wider interwoven argument, these ideas were pitched originally according to the aims of each individual project. In contrast this book draws together a set of related ideas and discussions into one project, making explicit the continuities and connections not evident in the separate publications.

The inspiration to do this has come from two sources. First, as I have more recently been working on the question of an applied visual anthropology I have realised that many of the issues I had already raised in my discussions of anthropological theory and visual representation, on experience and writing, and on new digital media and anthropological hypermedia continued to be pertinent in this apparently ‘new’ topic. Second, in November 2003 Stan Schectman invited me to contribute a paper to the WAVA conference in the USA, on the Future of Visual Anthropology. I was at the time on study leave and had just arrived in Malaysia so a trip to the USA was not possible, but I was kindly invited to contribute by e-mail. This paper, fuelled by the thoughts I had already had about the interrelatedness of the themes I had been developing in my existing work, gave me the impetus to tentatively suggest that the future of visual anthropology would depend on how visual anthropologists of the twenty-first century develop their use of new digital media, anthropological theory and applied visual anthropology. The positive
response I received to this paper, which forms parts of chapter 1 of this volume, has encouraged me to develop this argument here.

Part I

Situating visual anthropology
In this book I discuss the future of visual anthropology by suggesting a series of challenges, departures and opportunities for the subdiscipline as it enters the twenty-first century. I propose visual anthropology’s potential lies in its engagement with a set of key interrelated contexts: the increasingly wide use of visual ethnographic methods of research and representation in ‘visual’ subdisciplines across the social sciences and humanities; the theoretical demands of, and shifts in, a mainstream anthropology in which the visual has now become acceptable and popular as a methodology and object of analysis; a reassessment of the aspects of human experience that images and writing best represent, and a related analysis of the relationship between the visual and other senses through an engagement with recent developments in the anthropology of the senses; the possibilities offered by digital video and hypermedia that invite visual anthropologists to develop new practices; and increasing use of visual methods of research and representation in applied anthropology. In doing so I explore how theory and practice might be combined to produce a visual anthropology that has a strong profile in and outside the academy and communicates effectively to either audience.

First, however, what does it mean to refer to the future of an academic subdiscipline? Often our discussions of the future are constructed in relation to our definitions of the past. In Britain the history of social anthropology (see for example Kuper 1996; Mills 2002, 2003) and the historical relationship between social and visual anthropology (Grimshaw 2001) have been critically documented. In the USA the historical development of visual anthropology has been discussed widely in several contexts. Many aspects of its development are charted in the Web Archive in Visual Anthropology (WAVA), which contains Jay Ruby and Sol Worth’s original proposal to set up a Society for Visual Anthropology in the USA as well as the society’s newsletters from 1973 to 1987, and in the Journal Studies in Visual Communication from 1979 to 1985. This history is also represented in diverse volumes focusing on particular visual anthropologists and filmmakers. Alison Griffiths (2002) explores the development of anthropological cinema in the context of turn-of-the-century visual culture, Jay Ruby critically reviews a series of twentieth-century projects (2000a), E.D. Lewis’ (2004) edited volume discusses Timothy Asch’s work, and the wider-ranging Origins of Visual Anthropology conference and volume brings the work of the ‘founders’ of visual
anthropology to the fore (Prins and Ruby 2001–02). Although my main focus in this book is on what we might call mainstream contemporary visual anthropology in Britain, the USA and Australia, other histories of visual anthropology from across Europe – for example, France, Germany and Hungary – and more recent developments in China demonstrate how uneven the development of the subdiscipline has been internationally. Like the wider history of anthropology, which is embedded in political and power relationships, and the ambiguous relationship between anthropology and national culture and politics (see for example Eriksen and Nielsen 2001), visual anthropology theory and practice (and its relationship with applied anthropology) has developed differently in different locations.

Although these histories can be, and sometimes have been, challenged we have a fairly clear notion of how visual anthropology has arrived at its present form: our history is of the practices and performances of individuals, the formation and dissolution of institutions, associations and departments, the proceedings of conferences and seminars, developing theory, (changing) research practices, the production of anthropological texts, and the appropriation of technologies for these purposes. The future of visual anthropology is contingent on similar processes – that is, on the practices of research and representation we develop, the connections we make within the discipline, the academy and outside, the postgraduate training offered, the conferences, seminars, associations and networks we build, and the debates we engage in. I propose we view visual anthropologists, the creative practitioners of an academic subdiscipline, as a type of ‘community of practice’ – defined by Wenger et al. as ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (2002: 4) – and the creativity, innovation and debate this inspires. It will be through our creative and innovative practice as individual agents, and in collaborative groups working in different ways and with different media and methods, and through debate and discussion that the future of the subdiscipline will form, even though much of our interaction will be mediated by written text, film, e-mail and more, rather than as face-to-face contact. This book suggests some points we might keep in mind as we engage in the practices that will shape the future of visual anthropology.

This book is not a critique of visual anthropology. However, a critical edge is intended as I urge visual anthropologists to enter areas that have previously not been sufficiently engaged. With contemporary theoretical and methodological developments originating from within and outside the academy, the beginning of the twenty-first century presents an inspiring context for considering and securing the future of visual anthropology. In the second part of this chapter I identify some themes of this contemporary context that are particularly pertinent for the future of visual anthropology, and which shape the book – the interdisciplinary context, the anthropology of experience and the senses, applied visual anthropology, and new visual and digital media. First, I discuss how their histories were interwoven in relation to the emergence of mainstream social and cultural anthropology in the twentieth century.
The historical context

Rather than writing a ‘complete’ history here I present a series of critical insights into how visual, sensory and applied anthropology and new technology have been supported and sidelined by mainstream anthropology as it was established as a distinct academic discipline during the twentieth century. The turn of the century is a pertinent starting point for a number of reasons. Elizabeth Edwards proposes that colonial photography (produced from 1860 to 1920) is ‘evidence of the early years of what has become visual anthropology’ (Edwards 1992: 3). During this period, not only did the ‘parallel historical trajectories’ of anthropology and photography overlap (Pinney 1992; Young 1998: 4), but also the colonial project entailed an initial application of anthropological methods to an interdisciplinary project with non-academic ends, and the sensorium was implicated in the early anthropological theory that informed colonialism. Moreover, methodologically this was a period of technological innovation. Early fieldworkers used multiple media to collect ethnographic materials and combined spoken words with photographs, film and sound in their public lectures. These new photographic and cinematic techniques of research and representation were employed alongside the emergence of the ‘database’ academic book genre that used the multiple media of writing, photographs and diagrams (Cook 2004: 60).

The 1890s to 1950s: the rise and rejection of the senses, the visual and the applied

One of the first documented academic anthropological uses of film is Alfred Cort Haddon’s 1898 British expedition to the Torres Straits Islands, a large multi-disciplinary expedition to study scientifically the Islands’ people, ‘comprehensively equipped with the very latest scientific recording instruments’. This included ‘equipment for taking [photographic] stills, movies and even experimental colour photographs’ (Long and Laughren 1993; see also Griffiths 2002: 129–48), forming a multimedia project that Anna Grimshaw characterises as ‘a mixture of Victorian ideas with modern innovative practices’ (2001: 19). Vision was central to the Torres Straits expedition as both a method of research and its scientific approach to ‘native life’, which by favouring direct observation over missionaries’ and travellers’ reports fused the ‘roles of fieldworker and theorist’ (Grimshaw 2001: 20; see also Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 42). Vision also figured in another way in Haddon’s scientific project, which, David Howes reports, was concerned with the senses and sought to prove a hypothesis about the relative significance of vision in civilised and primitive cultures. It was believed that for civilised Europeans the ‘higher’ senses of sight and hearing were most important, in contrast associating the ‘lower’ senses of taste, touch and smell with animality. One task of the expedition was to test the hypothesis that “primitive” peoples would show a predilection for the “lower” or “animal” – in short “primitive” senses’ on the ‘primitive’ Torres Islanders. Howes notes that ‘Although the data itself was inconclusive, it was
interpreted to support this hypothesis’ (2003: 5). Griffiths also suggests that Haddon’s filmmaking was a form of ‘haptic cinema’ (through which the viewer ‘feels’ or ‘touches’ the image), which would have produced a ‘sensorially rich’ experience that was incompatible with the scientific quest of turn-of-the-century anthropology (2002: 142–3). This early evolutionary anthropology accommodated interdisciplinarity, engaged its era’s new technologies and seemingly found both a sensory approach and visual method uncontroversial.

Haddon was not the only anthropologist of his time to use film and photography. Franz Boas (see below) also used both media and Howard Morphy describes how Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, who did fieldwork together with Australian Aboriginals from 1894 onwards, used innovative visual methods as part of their participant observation. Taking few portraits of the type associated with the evolutionary paradigm, they produced ‘photographs of ritual events as they occurred’, developed photographs in the field and used them for elicitation, and in their film footage focused not on staged events but, for example, on a fight and women arguing (Morphy 1996: 140–1). Perhaps they were ahead of their time – Morphy notes that they ‘saw photography as an essential means of conveying the atmosphere and experience of the Australian rituals they witnessed’ (1996: 142), like Haddon’s work implying some attention to sensory experience. Both Spencer and Haddon appreciated the benefits of using multiple media in not only ethnographic research, but also in public presentations of this work in the form of the ‘multimedia lecture’ (Griffiths 2002: 166), which integrated film, photography and sound into spoken performance. Public film screenings also marked the early popular appeal of ethnographic film (Griffiths 2002: 283).

The work of Haddon, Spencer and others undoubtedly had a lasting influence on the development of the long-term fieldwork method as well as the use of visual methods in subsequent work (Grimshaw 2001: 51; Morphy 1996). However, it has more commonly been argued that social and cultural anthropology emerged around the time of World War I (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 37), usually credited to the influence of Bronislaw Malinowski, Franz Boas, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Marcel Mauss. Although approaches varied among these ‘founding fathers’, the approach associated with them advocated the long-term fieldwork method, rejected the evolutionary paradigm, was characterised in Britain by debates between functionalism and structural functionalism, sought methods for cultural translation, and was a comparative relativist discipline (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 37–53). It saw ‘anthropology as a holistic science’ (original italics) that did not study and compare singular aspects of societies – such as rituals – but aimed ‘to describe societies or cultures as integrated wholes’ (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 51). In his interpretation of how the senses came to be excluded from twentieth-century anthropology, Howes suggests these developments led anthropology to lose interest in the sensorium by concentrating on sight and hearing (2003: 6), allowing the development of subdisciplines such as visual anthropology (2003: 7) and ethnomusicology where ‘“other” sensory domains are customarily eliminated or evoked only indirectly’ (2003: 8). However, actually within this context we see a decline in interest not only in the sensory but also in
visual images and technologies. The notion of an observational anthropology was by no means coterminous with a visual anthropology. In fact an interrogation of the work of the observational method’s two main proponents – Malinowski and Boas – reveals that, although both were prolific photographers, their approaches actually limited the potential of the visual.

Dating from 1883 to 1930, historically Boas’ initial photography pre-dates Haddon’s expedition. His early work with the Kwakiutl Indians, which contributed to his ‘multimedia approach’ to anthropometric studies (also including measurements and plaster casts of body parts) (Jacknis 1984: 20), has some parallels with Haddon’s enthusiasm for new technologies. However, later Boas’ interests shifted and his photographs (often taken by an indigenous photographer) covered material culture, ceremonies, temporal and spatial patterning as well as portrait and physical-type photographs of people. They were presented in museum collections, at his lectures and in two monographs. His use of film, mainly to record native dance, was to combine these materials as a source of raw data for triangulation with other sources (Griffiths 2002: 306). Although some see Boas as a ‘father figure in visual anthropology’ (Ruby 1980: 7, see Jacknis 1984: 51), Jacknis’ analysis demonstrates that ‘photography was caught in the inherent contradiction that defined Boas’ fieldwork’ (1984: 47). Boas believed culture could only be understood historically and he moreover mistrusted the visual because it only showed the surface. For Boas ‘the study of the human mind was possible only through the medium of language’, thus ‘the mere act of witnessing some exotic behaviour was insufficient’ (Jacknis 1984: 44). As such his approach foiled and did not promote any anthropological appreciation of the scientific value of photography. He created a legacy for his students (such as Margaret Mead), who later followed his example of using visual media, a context where the visual image was not valued.13

Malinowski was also an active fieldwork photographer (about 1,100 of his images are archived at the London School of Economics (Young 1998: 21)). He rejected the principles of the anthropometric photography of the nineteenth century to create a photographic record of ‘living’ people (Young 1998: 4), using photography extensively in his publications (1998: 21). However, while his photography was prolific (and influenced later visual practices), it was fundamentally incompatible with the fieldwork experience Malinowski advocated. In Grimshaw’s interpretation Malinowski’s fieldwork methodology was based in romanticism, it relied on ‘the cultivation of human sensibility or passion’, and repudiated ‘technology, mechanical skill and the trappings of industrial civilisation’ (Grimshaw 2001: 54). Likewise, his writing was ‘painterly’ rather than cinematic, relying on literary composition rather than montage (2001: 55–6). Grimshaw shows how Malinowski’s observational approach employed experience and description to create a picture of a ‘whole’ society or context. The mediation of technology and specificity of photography constituted a contradiction in this work, and his wider approach left little room for visual methodology. Jacknis’ and Grimshaw’s respective analyses of the legacies of Boas and Malinowski suggest that although participant observation became a requirement for anthropological fieldwork, it is