

Review of: Astari N., Pink S. (2015), *Laundry Lives: Everyday Life and Environmental Sustainability*,  
Anthropological film

Dom Holdaway

Website of the project: [www.laundrylives.com](http://www.laundrylives.com)



*Laundry Lives* is a 40-minute film made by the anthropologist and visual ethnographer Sarah Pink (Monash University) and the freelance documentarist Nadia Astari. It was produced with the support of the Design Research Institute and Digital Ethnography Research Centre at RMIT University as well as Unilever. The film is a part observational, part interview-documentary, focusing on five people from Yogyakarta, Indonesia, as they demonstrate and talk through their quotidian experiences with laundry.

All of the participants – Lia, Dyna, Ning, Adi and Nur – are married with children, they have middle-class professions (in education, business and the civil service) and reside in the periphery of Yogyakarta. Three of them (Dyna, Ning and Nur) have domestic helpers. The film presents them, therefore, as representative of the booming middle class in Indonesia: a social group whose increasing wealth has brought about changes in their daily routines and greater demand for more costly domestic facilities – as well as the infrastructures behind them. The shorthand for this change in the film is the washing machine: precisely that kind of expensive appliance which can facilitate chores and alter one's daily routine. By lingering on and consequently “over-exposing” this technology, the film reveals not only how such changes can clash with more traditional modes, but also how they can invoke broader problems of ecological sustainability, for instance requiring electricity and large quantities of water. The appliance therefore enables a set of pressing ethnographic questions that have accompanied the rapid growth in Indonesia's population and economy over the past fifteen years.

The editing of the film is loosely structured in thematic points, each introduced via a voice-over by Pink, that range from the participants' daily lives, routines and professions to their use of the local infrastructures and their relationships to sustainable behaviours. The film clearly adheres to the visual ethnographic methodology that Pink herself has long advocated (e.g., in her widely-known volume *Digital Ethnography*, printed this year in its 4<sup>th</sup> edition): the conversations are shaped by the interviewer, but the participants are given great freedom and agency. For example, in the part of the documentary that focuses on infrastructure, questions about the services provided by the State (power and water – the latter for those who do not use their own well) lead to responses about the irritations of low water pressure or concerns about varying electrical currents that can damage washing machines. The film provides visual counterpoints to these points via close-ups of trickling water or of the appliances' digital displays. Meanwhile, the participants' reflections are constantly if implicitly tied back to the broader themes of the film – such as the difficulty for the Indonesian State to provide consistently and economically for the demands of its blossoming middle classes.

The domestic spaces we see in *Laundry Lives* are also guided by this observational approach. The participants define the film's movements as they are invited to guide the camerawoman through their daily lives, therefore enabling our comprehension of these practices. When Lia is asked about her routine, for instance, her answers speak to the value of time management between chores, working from home and childcare, but her movements make visible further nuance – from the kitchen, where her actions are interrupted by her young daughter Zizi, to the disorderly home office, and outside, as she and Zizi walk to her grandparents' house where the child spends her days. Dyna's responses are similarly emblematic: not only does she pray and read the Qur'an in the morning; she also checks social media (the statement is matched with a shot of her on her phone). Later, her tour of the house culminates in the "gadget room" where we see a collage of domestic items, electronic gadgets, toys, medicine, a boxed religious statue, a MacBook and a pile of papers that she has brought home to grade. Again, the visual representation tells us more of this consumerist, middle-class lifestyle and its traces of cultural specificity than reported words of the interviewee could.

These instances signal the great benefits of using video as a means for anthropological analysis. The editing and the interview questions foreground a set of issues that are evidently important to the film(maker)'s agenda – essentially those keywords in the subtitle of the film. At the same time, the questions coexist with the participants' responses and actions, and in dialogue these illustrate, in turn, the ethnographic findings of the film. Let us consider the tour of Nur's home. One vital element is the kitchen, where the interviewer-camerawoman explicitly asks to see and to film her well, as her only source for water. Later, Nur guides us to her living room, furnished with desks, a computer and a printer, filing cabinets and the shelves full of the "educational T-shirts" that are the core of her business. The juxtaposition of the spaces, shown thanks to the filmmakers' choices as well as Nur's own agency, make visible the coexistence between old and new forms of daily existence for the family.

Something further emerges in the small difference in Nur's disposition in the two cases: she appears reticent to focus on the well, and insists, perhaps defensively, that

it had been built before she bought the house. In the living room, on the other hand, she appears much more relaxed and content. These different attitudes potentially point to a desire to present her life as more closely tied to her business and its cultural dimension (the T-shirts feature images and statements from famous scientists of the past) than to more archaic traditions, as represented by the well.

As these examples show, the use of video captures something more complex than the “scripted” or ethnographic investigation delineated in the interview questions, in the specific turns of phrase and almost imperceptible glances that reveal implicit cultural tensions and social dynamics within the context that is the film’s focus. Indeed, one of the many compelling elements of *Laundry Lives* is how it captures these nuances, often deliberately leaving the space for the viewer to reflect on their implications. One such instance is tied to the fact that the washing machines are all in English, thus the Indonesian language we hear is interspersed with words like “soak”, “rinse” and “spin”. No more is said of this than Lia mentioning she learned the terms from the manual; nonetheless the vocabulary nods to the globalised root of the technology used. Another broader observation is invited by continued motif of gender relationships with which the film engages. The one male participant, Adi, speaks freely of how his responsibility for the laundry sometimes leads to mockery, yet that he does this chore happily in order to make his own contribution to gender parity. However, Adi’s words are implicitly compared the attitudes of Nur’s husband Taufiq – who cooks, but does not do the laundry – and Lia’s husband Imam – who willingly shares all the chores, but states that “as a man” he is bothered by having to do so. All of this, of course, has the potential for a wider consideration of the tensions between conservative and liberal gender roles in the Indonesian middle class.

A final, related example is made visible in the relationships between some of the participants and their domestic helpers. *Laundry Lives* makes it clear, again through juxtaposition, that paying for someone’s labour can make a significant difference to the leisure and work/study time of the participants (Lia faces the tough schedule mentioned above, Dyna gleefully states that she is not interested in doing the chores). More than this, the film also unveils another hidden tension in the self-representation for some participants. Nur and Ning, for instance, seek to demonstrate to the camera their domestic prowess through washing machine operation, only to be quickly obliged to call on their assistants for help. Again, then, there is potential to say much here of the close ties between gender, domestic space, visibility and class.

Through the kinds of representations mentioned here, *Laundry Lives* is a testament not only to the great potential of video ethnography for a set of specific research concerns, but also to capture and record intriguing nuances which might otherwise slip through the hands of the researcher, yet which can also aid in our sociological inquiry.