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Title: **The World's Most Amazing 100% Awesome Photography Theory**

Dr. Sharon Harper
Centre for Art & Photography
University of Gloucestershire
Hardwick Campus
St. Paul's Road
Cheltenham
Glos
GL50 4BS

+44 (0) 1242 714973
sharper@glos.ac.uk

Abstract:

A recent British trend has been the growth in HE photography courses with a concurrent emphasis on industry skills and commercial career outcomes (Edge 2009). And, although pedagogic approaches to practical material have adapted, the theoretical material can be seen to be woefully lacking. Calls for a re-examination have indeed been made (Haeffner 2008, Newbury 2009, Edge 2009, Bate 2010), but little has been offered that is not simply a rearticulation of the already dominant theoretical models. Rather than relying on the well-trodden models that promote either photographer as visionary or an emphasis on meaning generation, it is proposed that photography theory should look to the breadth of approaches found in film studies, particularly in relation to commercial production. The two areas for development particularly advocated here are genre studies and industry analysis in terms of production and distribution. Since most commercially-bound photographers work within industrial structures and constraints, both of these approaches would facilitate an understanding of creativity and innovation in this context. This would open up areas of photographic study that have thus far been largely ignored by academics and, further, would facilitate a closer relationship and dialogue between theory and practice in the educational context.

Key Words:
Theory; Commercial Photography; Institutional Analysis; Genre; Higher Education; Photography

In Spring 2009, the *Photography Education Symposium* held at Southbank University focused upon the current state of photography in Higher Education (HE). The journal, *Photographies*, subsequently dedicated its September issue of the same year to those discussions. The key areas of concern, as summarised by Darren Newbury, were "the place of photography in the university, […] the politics of education, and the contemporary challenges faced not just by educators but also by students and graduates" ("Image, Theory, Practice" 117). One recurring theme was the relationship of theory to practice in the HE context.

A point that underpinned these discussions was that photography degrees have been a relatively recent addition to the academic portfolio of HE courses, often having begun life as technical diplomas. As a result of this shift, course content has been debated, rethought, and restructured. Regarding the 20th century movement of American art instruction from art academies to HE, Howard Singerman observes that: "[T]he university's demand for the production of knowledge – indeed its takeover of the training of artists, its fashioning of art as research and art criticism as science – belongs to the specialization, administrative rationalization and 'professionalized treatment of the cultural tradition'…" (156). Art and design degrees, then, have been slowly incorporated and transformed to match the broader agenda of knowledge production through 'investigative practice', an agenda that has sat uncomfortably with traditional instruction of the 'technical arts', including photography, in many modern, Western, educational cultures.

For photography courses, HE credibility rests significantly with theoretical engagement, most often characterised by 'critical' approaches developed by Cultural Studies and Poststructuralism in the 1970s and 80s. My own degree in photography commenced in the Autumn of 1991 at Concordia University, Montreal, a programme that was just eight years old at that stage (Fig. 1). The first written assignment set in our introductory History of Photography was a critical engagement with John Tagg's *Burden of Representation*, published three years earlier. A second, seminal text examined was Roland Barthes' 1964 semiotic reading of a Panzani advertisement, a brand of 'Italian' pasta and prepared sauces aimed at the French market, in "Rhetoric of the Image" (translated into English in 1977). His analysis ultimately provided the means for a critique of advertising imagery, and, in line with Tagg's project, capitalism. [INSERT FIG. 1 HERE]

These texts, along with Victor Burgin's *Thinking Photography*, Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, along with a canon of key photographers, established by Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography* (see Crow), formed the cornerstone of my own photographic education. Likewise, the Cultural Studies concepts at work in many of these texts formed the foundations of theoretical discussion in some of the earliest degree programmes in the UK, including "semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, together with Lacan's psychoanalytical models" (McWilliams 250). And many of these texts, or texts derived from these larger projects, form the cornerstone of much photographic theory taught today at HE level. But as course numbers grow, along with an increasing number of professional specialisations, the theoretical research has not kept pace in scale or breadth. Reading lists gathered for this research[1] show continued reliance on these key texts where they appear for *all* courses regardless of course orientation – fine art, commercial or documentary.

My argument is that photography theory has not developed the scope of its subject matter nor developed its theoretical horizons sufficiently. Poststructural and Cultural Studies models of meaning analysis and ideological critique supported by those early key texts remain the form of much current research. The limitations of the continued reliance on these models are both academic and pedagogic, especially with reference to the commercial photography sector.[2] An engaged and empirical form of analysis of commercial work, practice and industry is lacking in this research

tradition. Such a gap in research does not constitute a complete void on good material with a commercial focus. Although I am not including photojournalism in my definition of commercial here, it is an aspect of mass-produced and consumed imagery that has significantly expanded its research base, particularly under the larger umbrella of Media Studies. There are some excellent historical studies of commercial industry (Brown, Frosh, Johnston, McCauley, Jenkins "Images and Enterprise"), and some notable contemporary studies (Lien, McNamara). There is also one substantial sociological study of commercial photographers' working practice published in 1978 by Barbara Rosenblum. This text certainly has the potential to offer a useful historical base from which to investigate contemporary practice. But given that such studies are limited and sporadic in nature, I will argue that Film Studies can serve as a model as to the breadth of both subject matter and methodological approaches that photography studies should emulate.

These limitations impact upon the theoretical material available for teaching on commercially-focused HE photography courses, where students are expected to engage with theoretical ideas and arguments. Aside from the uniformly-listed, aforementioned texts, there are contemporary works that appear regularly on reading lists and that do focus upon commercial work. Liz Wells' *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, a text that appears systematically on reading lists, contains a section entitled "Spectacles and Illusion: Photography and Commodity Culture" by Anandi Ramamurthy. The 2015 edition covers celebrity portraiture, paparazzi, stock photography, advertisements, fashion and tourism, representing some popular aspects of commercial photography. A section that is particularly apt is "The Context of the Image" where similar issues regarding the neglect of production context are discussed (280-283). But the discussion had within it emphasises the gaps in photography theory even more acutely by what it *doesn't* contain. The literature to which it refers primarily date from the 1980s and early 90s (for example Nye and Slater) with a mention of Osborne's 2003 study. Older texts can, of course, be valuable, but the fact that an updated edition of the book continues to rely on these texts rather than contemporary ones suggests a paucity of current examples and studies upon which to draw. In addition, although the discussion refers to context, it doesn't engage in any empirical research nor does it discuss much within the cited articles. Ramamurthy writes "The vast array of commercial images has…made their contextualisation increasingly difficult. It would be impossible to contextualise them all. Information about production is not always available, and this increases the reality of consumption over that of production" (280). As such, the analyses within are more concerned with reception than production and make broad generalisations about power relationships between producers and consumers with the focus upon meaning production. Little is said about the production of the images themselves. The work discussed, as is often the case when commercial imagery is highlighted, is largely there as illustrations of ideological propagation. I would suggest that there is an underlying belief amongst photography theorists that such analysis is the only credible 'critical' form. But as other media-based disciplines have shown, an empirical understanding of the material structures which commission, create and distribute commercial work need not engage in traditional cultural critique (although it might) and still offer rigorous and scholarly engagement worthy of academia. Furthermore, they also demonstrate that it is possible to get to the mechanics of production, even when media institutions prefer secrecy, and that is largely through empirical research. We just simply haven't done it.

Wariness of empirical methodologies as part of post-structural thought also plays a role in resistance to the types of analyses I am proposing here. Certainly forms of empiricism, as formulated in the 19th and early 20th centuries, are problematic. But a more complex and nuanced engagement with empirical research has emerged over several decades. As Nick Haeffner explains, "The term 'empirical' has been a dirty word for a long time among many radical theorists but the word has a double meaning. It is used to refer to a doctrine which treats data as 'factual' but it also refers to

data derived from experience (which may or may not be 'true' in a positivist sense)" (179). Researchers in the creative fields are far more likely to highlight biases and limitations in their own perspective, more likely to acknowledge the limitations of the evidence gathered and the methodologies used, and are more likely to see their findings as small parts of much larger pictures. "Theory which shows no concern for the empirical becomes a series of vacuous generalisations, while empirical research which shows no awareness of its theoretical underpinning risks relying on naïve and ultimately unsupportable assumptions" (Haeffner 180). The approach proposed here seeks to negotiate a middle path by which theory and empirical research are more productively engaged with one another.

I should make it clear that I am not arguing that courses do not occupy themselves with issues of industry. As many of the course descriptors outline, students are encouraged to research industry players, roles and relations, and to consider their own practice on an individual creative level alongside the genre categories and conventions within which they sit. But this practice in itself does not constitute theoretical engagement. Some of my own commercially-oriented students arrive at their dissertation wanting to address industry issues rather than engage in image analysis. Gathering good quality academic material that is directly related is tricky, and they spend much time looking at related disciplines and then applying it. This research strategy is not bad but *is* indicative of the lack of subject-specific studies.

Haeffner also addresses the issue. "[W]hat seems to be missing is a way of talking about and validating media practice that is not a form of contemporary art practice, underwritten by theory, but that is industrially based, as in most media practice which occurs outside galleries and universities" (185). He does, however, offer a way forward. Similar to my argument here, he makes the case for the wider adoption of developments in Film Studies, namely 'mid-range theory'. This group of approaches include careful empirical research at the heart of analysis and in Haeffner's words, "mid-range theoretical approaches usually have the advantage of placing a strong emphasis on the specific industrial determinants of a given film, video or photograph. Their insistence that each object of study is unique and distinct also provides a useful platform for the consideration of practice as well as theory" (181).

There is good reason for photography theorists to look to Film Studies as a model. Aside from the increasing synergy between still and moving image, film, as a medium, includes the production of everything from the most commercial output - independently financed exploitations movies such as *Eat My Dust* (1976 prod. Roger Corman) - to the most avant-garde – the classic *Wavelength* (1967 dir. Michael Snow). Dudley Andrew explains that cinema "stands between popular expressions (magazines, pop music, TV) and the more considered and considerable arts (novel, opera, theatre); […] between a corporate or an anonymous mode of production and the auteur mode it sometimes adopts from literature" (348). Film Studies, over time, has developed a broad range of theoretical approaches that can cover this span – everything from Historical Poetics and formal analysis, to Hollywood genres, production and distribution structures, reception and audience studies, as well as 'High Theory' that incorporates semiotics, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis.

Photography, as a medium, likewise boasts such a range, from the most commercial of cat photography such as the independently produced *World's Most Super Amazing 100% Awesome Cat Calendar* (photographer Kate Funk; graphic designer Brennan Groh, Fig. 2) to the highly conceptual work of Andreas Gursky or Jeff Wall. Photographic imagery is produced, distributed and consumed in many different contexts with many and varied structures at play. [INSERT FIG. 2 HERE]In a commercial context, these structures and processes can include technical practices and constraints, shoot location requirements and constraints, location of related creative or production services,

client briefs, budgets, genre conventions, advertising conventions, media buying practices, publishing destinations, target audiences, amongst many others. And, these different contexts all play a role in shaping the image in terms of form and content. What I am saying is hardly news.

But photographic theory covers few of these topics, often makes huge assumptions about commercial production and consumption, and also has a tendency to make broad claims that lack a nuanced or empirically-founded understanding. Often, understanding the industrial constraints or context of an image interferes with a discussion of the free play of meaning that has been of greater academic interest, spurred on by the embrace of Barthes' famous 1967 analysis 'Death of the Author'. Indeed, little dedicated study of the contemporary commercial photography industry as a site of creative communication exists, Lien being a good example of the exception. Rather, most contemporary, commercial-industry-focused discussions are analyses that include photography as one amongst many strains of the so-called 'creative industries', often situated within business studies or economics. Although these studies have value, they rarely (if ever) follow on to look at creative production and distribution with the images or practitioners themselves taking centre stage.

Two areas of analysis would be particularly useful to address the gap. The first area is in relation to genre and conventions. An earlier text that focuses on conventional structures in a commercial context is Paul Messaris' *Visual Persuasion* (1997), but more recent work has been done in David Bate's book *Key Concepts*, published in 2009. The book appears on many of my gathered reading lists with a few modules being developed explicitly around its content, suggesting an appetite for such an approach. Despite being an introductory textbook, he sets out the case for photography to be understood in terms of its genres and conventions. "The advantage to [genre study] was that it showed that genres were not only a basis for grouping types of work into a category, but also that those categories could reveal the way that they operate to generate fields of 'expectation and hypothesis' for spectators" (3).[3] In line with this is an increasing body of literature that focuses on specific genres, notably fashion, still life (often incorporating food) and landscape. Some of these studies treat practitioners as creative auteurs rather than situating the work within its commercial production (e.g. Martineau). Others cast the photographic work of the particular genre under consideration within a critical/political light, with an underlying agenda to academically examine it as 'transgressive' that legitimises it as art rather than as conventional and commercial (e.g. Evans). In other words, its aims, operations and 'effects' are seen as similar to those of art, viewed as distancing itself, or even challenging, mainstream culture and its power relations. Work that might fall into clear-cut, genre categories as identified in a commercial context (say, high circulation magazine, catalogue or lookbook publications for instance) is often taken to be inherently problematic, a premise stemming from Cultural Studies-influenced critique. Both Shinkle's and Bartlett et. al.'s collections of essays on fashion address the commercial imagery more directly, with many of the analyses of conventions serving as examples of their (pernicious) ideological nature.

Even so, photographic genres and their conventions, as sites of industry form and creativity, are is still in early stages of development as a theoretical line of enquiry. As Bate notes "It is surprising that *genre* […] has not been taken up in photography like it has in film theory or the study of literature. The idea that there are categories within cinema or literature is quite normal and genre operates as much in shops where DVDs or novels are sold as they do in academic study" (3: emphasis in text). One reasonable hypothesis as to why the academic literature on photography has not engaged with genre in any substantial capacity may be its roots and historical ties to art and art history. Bate himself highlights the historical legacy of painting's genre categories and it transposition onto photography's generic repertoire (4). With the advent of the avant-garde and the prizing of originality, the categorisation of work into genres implies a lack of vision and its unthinking,

uncreative, mechanical production. Indeed, Bate is quick to qualify his use of genre and convention in order to classify and describe photography. "None of this is to take away *originality* involved in specific photographs; nor is it intended to" (4: emphasis in text).

However, innovation in commercial work is not identical to 'originality' - certainly not in the avant-garde artistic tradition (if the terminology itself is not an oxymoron). Unless one is using the term originality to simply mean something novel, then strategies that are fundamentally radical are often eschewed commercially as it often alienates audiences. Such practices, however, do not mean, that innovation does not occur. Certainly visual conventions, often specific to particular publications or product types (in photographic advertising), are identifiable and sometimes slow to change. But much like Hollywood film that repeatedly relies on a set of identifiable conventions in specific genres, there is also innovation, often coming from genre-mixing rather than something more radical. Much more could be written on genre-specific conventions, and on genre-mixing, which is arguably a significant method of innovation in the commercial industry. Such an argument is made by Caves regarding the creative industries but, like much of this type of analysis, the focus is primarily upon film and music; photography production simply does not feature.

A comparison of two editorial food images, both illustrating pancake recipes, demonstrates the kind of understanding that this line of enquiry affords. If we begin with a conventional food image of pancakes found on the food photographer Jen Rich's blog *Sweet Little Dish*, we can outline the current conventions of food editorial imagery (Fig. 3). [INSERT FIG. 3 HERE] Most basically, food is its primary subject. The food is already prepared and shown in its final form, shot slightly from above, as if the viewer is sitting with the food in front of them at the table. It is lit from the left, using daylight in this case, with reflectors lighting the right-hand side. The composition emphasises the formal qualities of the prepared food on the plate, featuring basic shapes such as circles, spheres, lines and curves. It maintains standard conventions of balance whereby the colour and shape are distributed according to weight within the frame. The frame crops the props so that the lines become part of a more abstract design in the image. Further, it follows the well-worn food image convention of shallow depth of field, in widespread use since the 1990s.

These conventions can vary, of course, depending on context. Many dishes are partially cropped, much like the well-known first edition cover of the BBC's *Good Food* magazine launched in 1989 (see image here). However, cookbooks such as *Mary Berry's Complete Cookbook* produced by Dorling Kindersley show the majority of the food as a complete dish, again shot from above or a high angle. These shots usually are coupled with a deep depth of field where all the elements are sharp. Also, some images attempt to convey a 'natural light' source, even when recreated in a studio by having evidently directional light, with some degree of softly delineated shadow. Further analysis would be able to show whether these are conventions determined by media form (magazines vs cookbooks), by period (the early 1990s was a transition moment in the convention), by publishing house (Dorling Kindersley vs BBC publishing), is one of a set of broader conventions (food images are conventionally composed either in x or y fashion), or even by photographer (something we might identify as 'style' or 'signature'). Nonetheless, given that these are conventions, most food photographers would recognise the stylistic characteristics, as would many consumers.

[INSERT FIG. 4 HERE] Contrasted to Rich's image is Piotr Gregorczyk's 2012 editorial for the food section of *Men's Health* (Fig. 4). It maintains some of the key features of the genre; most basically, its main subject is food. It features standard props such as a plate and uses the shapes of both the props and the food to create a graphic composition, much as in Fig. 3. Gregorczyk's image is also shot in a studio rather than on location, like many of its genre. The camera is positioned at the same height as the food, rather than from an angle or directly from above, with more dramatic lighting

that allows for some level of shadow and is against a grey background rather than a bright, white one. Although less usual, the darker hues and tones are a convention found in food photography aimed at men. More striking, however, is the fact that the food is in motion with no human presence as an obvious catalyst, unlike, say, the documentary/lifestyle food images by Lis Parsons in Nigella Lawson's cookbook *Kitchen*, whereby she is shown in the process of cooking, manipulating the ingredients, and working in a home-like environment. The food is in its final form, about to be served, and yet completely in motion. He has taken the 'still' out of still life.

This approach to food, however, can be seen as deriving its innovation from genre-mixing rather than something completely radical. The image certainly has the look of something heavily post-produced, but Gregorczyk's specialisation in high-speed capture is important in this context. As such, he is using some of the technique and convention of contemporary *sports* photography – high-speed capture of motion and frequently side on shots - and applying it to studio shots of food. This mixing of genres makes sense given the context of the magazine – *Men's Health* – and its readership, who will likely be visually familiar with the formal characteristics of high-speed capture sports imagery, with its high definition, bold colour, and the detail of rivulets of mud, sweat and tears.

For those committed to the relationship between analysis and cultural critique, this line of enquiry may seem uninteresting, but such studies are academically significant. As the Film Studies literature demonstrates, not all genre analysis centres upon cultural critique. Along with an overview of socio-cultural theories of Hollywood film genres, Neale (among the foremost theorists on film genre) also surveys an increasing emphasis on their industrial contexts of production that do not set out cultural critique as their end goal (231-255). Photography theory can and should do the same.

Undoubtedly genres and conventions are discussed in both theory and crit sessions with students. But investigating these in a more systematic and overt empirical fashion, particularly in academic research, allows for greater understanding of innovation and the ways in which it evolves. And analyses of this kind are valuable in terms of understanding creative development and decision-making, certainly within the commercial context. Such analyses can then also be transferred to theoretical learning in students' historical and theoretical studies as it has done for Film Production students accessing Film Studies literature (e.g. Bartoni).

The second area of analysis that is long-overdue is in relation to the commercial industry itself. As with genre analysis, Film Studies has developed this line of enquiry in 'historical poetics' (Jenkins "Historical Poetics", Bordwell). Understanding industry structures as a driver of creativity, of production contexts that shape genres, of changing production modes, commissioning processes and distribution channels all help to illuminate the shape and context of the final image. It also, crucially, helps to understand practice in photography. This need in photography studies has been noted by Bate. Although not *his* project, he makes the case that "[t]he sociological anatomy of these institutions might reveal the systems by which photographs are produced, the arteries of power and decision-making, or even the creative space that photographers are supposed to occupy. Such a project is probably urgently needed…" (1). Haeffner also points out that "It is necessary to acknowledge how much the underlying economy of the culture industries has changed since the theoretical positions of the 1960s and 1970s were first articulated", and makes the forceful argument that "understanding the process by which an object is made and circulated may be more important and interesting than learning how to interpret it according to certain well-worn concepts, such as deterritorialization, Oedipality, the punctum, relational aesthetics etc" (176).

Haeffner makes his case in terms of television, and some researchers situated under the broader auspices of Media and Journalism Studies have concurrently addressed industry research in relation

to photojournalism, not least because of the impact of digital technology and citizen journalism (e.g. Grayson, Caple and Knox). Such investigation has the potential to be illuminating in regards to commercial practice. After all, how images are produced surely makes a significant difference to our understanding of their design, their form, and their communication. For instance, Elaine Constantine's editorial image from 'Sarf Coasting' (1997) is visually innovative (see image here). It takes documentary genre conventions of wide-angle, models caught mid motion, excited, animated, exaggerated expressions of joy, evident flash, sometimes off-kilter (a style she developed photographing the club scene she was involved in) and applies it to fashion, a genre that conventionally is a display of structured design and control. It is possible to analyse it in this capacity.

But a significant element to its production was the fact that the editorial was commissioned by and appeared in *The Face*, a magazine originally conceived of and produced independently by Nick Logan. He, and the few others working for him, often commissioned articles and editorials based on personal interest or creative idea rather than a market strategy. Logan describes his editorial approach: "I'd commission pieces about things that maybe I'd seen driving in to work, stuff that was in my head, and provided others didn't say 'that's ridiculous' we'd cover it. It wasn't PR-driven…. So, it was very open in the magazine. Almost anybody could come in and say they really liked something and we'd do it …. No commercial justification at all" (Test Pressing). These conditions meant that photographers who were often young and little known had the opportunity to produce work that didn't fit usual magazine fashion (or music or portrait) conventions. These commissions paid little if any money, but photographers were offered greater creative control whilst the editors took greater risk in the imagery they were willing to publish. Constantine herself was commissioned by the newly appointed art director, Lee Swillingham, who followed in the footsteps of this editorial mandate by focusing on new talent and fresh vision.[4] However, as Ane Lynge-Jorlén has highlighted "Although niche fashion magazines are positioned outside the mainstream of fashion media, they are tightly linked to the wider fashion industry and do not work in isolation from the wider fields of fashion journalism, photography, publishing, and clothing trends." (8) This manifestation of 'alternative' but commercially-driven production reflects aspects of the independent cinema. And, like our look at genre and industry studies, the impact of independent production on creative output and artistic integrity within a commercial context is the subject of Film Studies investigation (Tzioumakis).

Although the advent of new, independent magazines had a notable effect on the development of creative work produced, this path still represents an historically conventional route for commercial image content, at least for the 20th century. The advent of the internet and digitalisation has shaken practice, production and distribution across creative media more broadly.

Let us return to the case of Funk and Groh's *100% Awesome Cat Calendar*. Until now this type of imagery has been found largely on greeting cards, wall posters (usually with accompanying aphorisms), in advertising intended to convey particular attributes such as cleverness, softness, cuteness etc., or on calendars. Historically, these have been produced by publishing houses whereby they conceive of a project, and they can opt to either use a staff photographer to produce the required imagery, commission a photographer to produce imagery according to a brief, or else licence stock photography through a picture library. The publishing house then deals with printing and distribution.

Two things mark out the case of Funk's particular calendar. One is the rise of user-generated image content across different internet platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, individual blogs, web forums etc. Cat photography has come to play a large role in visual economy of the internet. As has been reported, cat images have been some of the most successful viral content (Dredge; Stein). The imagery of Funk and Groh's calendar fits into the general trend that comes not

from publishing houses but from the public, with the images' gently ironic humour contrasting the aristocratic reputation of cats with kitsch (Fig. 5) or over-the-top broody or philosophical scenarios. [INSERT FIG. 5 HERE] In addition, neither producer has been commissioned. Many photographers have historically acted as freelancers, but as the number of staff photographers decreases, the nature of how they work is changing. Funk and Groh have not only conceived of and developed their own creative idea based on cat photography, but they have produced what is a traditional product without relying upon publishing houses to realise the concept. They have raised money (and profile) through crowdfunding, particularly for the 2014 edition, - something more commonly discussed in terms of film. The production was promoted via Kickstarter with a promotional film (Fig. 6), and, according to the Kickstarter statistics listed on the project's webpage, Funk and Groh managed to raise US$25,183 from 1,119 backers (Kickstarter). In conjunction crowdfunding, the pair also developed a following for the product through social media, particularly reviews on blogging sites. [INSERT FIG. 6 HERE] In their case, Funk and Groh have not just been responsible for the production of the work, but have assumed the roles of an entire publishing industry chain.

I am not arguing that theirs is a unique or individually revolutionary practice of independent production (and there is also a related story of changes to the publishing industry to be told in conjunction). Developing research in relation to social media as a form of display and distribution, although largely with respect to vernacular images and photojournalism rather than commercial content (Harper), highlights these broader shifts. But these changes to the production and distribution of commercial images have had an impact on what we see and where we see it. These shifts also affect practice and should be reflected in the theoretical learning of the HE education of future photographers. Many reading lists gathered for this research attest to the fact that issues of production and distribution are addressed on a 'how to' practical level within HE photography courses, but contain little material with theoretical engagement of specific industry practices, and certainly none that stem from empirical institutional analysis.[5]

The difficulties for commercially-oriented photography courses in HE can be seen to have developed over time. Photography in the UK has historically been a small and insular community, with a deep division between commercial and 'artistic' work taking hold as early as the late 1850s (Edwards) and becoming completely entrenched by the end of WW1 (Crow). Recently, however, there has been a significant growth in the HE provision of commercial photography studies. Although researchers should, arguably, be driven to expand the breadth of their field for the sake of knowledge and understanding, a significant motivation for the argument made in this paper relates to that growth. British HE courses are expected to have some component of theoretical and/or historical content, usually between 20 and 25%, my own course being typical. And again, as with our programme, most began life as diploma programmes in the Polytechnics, where the emphasis was on teaching and not research (McWilliams 240).[6]

Whilst the courses that had an exploratory ethos (derived from the visual approach encouraged at art colleges) then moved into degree courses, commercially-oriented photography courses hung on to their roots in technical colleges, keeping the emphasis on skills and meeting circumscribed briefs. However, with the proliferation of 'post-'92' universities, like the University of Gloucestershire, commercially-focused design courses including photography have grown.[7] Some of these continue to offer a generalist study of photography with loosely defined outcomes, taking a more exploratory approach to visual development that is akin to other fine art disciplines. However, more courses are specifying their own individual professional foci. As Edge highlights "the current shift towards photography courses marketing themselves via commercial distinctions such as documentary, fashion or fine art rather than just photography" (206). She continues to emphasise that "the 'skills'

and employability agenda is already being used as a marketing tool for most of our photographic courses. So, on one level course publicity is tailored to recognize the need for specific skills that meet the requirements of employment…" (206).

Although she goes on to criticise academics' lack of engagement with such an agenda, I would argue that professional or commercial photography concerns have taken a more significant role in the curriculum. As with our own (and we are not alone), modules that emphasise business skills, client handling, meeting commercial briefs, not to mention work placement, are not just electives but core material. But again, these tend to remain practical in nature, with the research and reading focused around practical instruction. Maras explains that media production education "follows a logic of replication, simulation and internalization of industry techniques and format..." (97). Unlike fine art photography courses that, on the whole, do not explicitly coach their students in this way, commercially-focused courses actively encourage their students to see themselves within the realm of production and distribution channels. This pedagogical form can be seen to be at odds with Cultural Studies-derived theoretical content that almost entirely seeks to undermine the very type of production with which these students are aiming to engage. For commercially or 'professionally' – oriented courses, research material and texts that integrate well with the ethos and perspective of their practical learning are found to be limited or even out-dated by many lecturers. Mine is not a call to jettison cultural critique within these courses but rather to expand research, methods, analysis and thought. And, many discussions between colleagues and conferences, external examiners and visiting lecturers confirm that I am not alone in this conclusion.

I'd like to address two, somewhat opposing, difficulties that may arise as issues at this point. On the one hand, Edge makes an important point that the polarity and hierarchy still does persist between what is considered artistic photographic practice and 'commercial' practice and she aptly summarises what are arguably implicit but real attitudes. "To put it bluntly, or offer this up as a polemic, in fine art it would appear that the art photographer can be positioned as an 'intellectual' only if what 'he' does is located as quite different from the everyday photographic practices of the commercial photographer, while in media studies, which cannot avoid studying the everyday uses of photography, academic or intellectual standing is signified by being above the ordinary consumers or commercial photographers" (208). At the recent UK-based APHE (Association for Photography in Higher Education) conference, the commercial sector was referred to on more than one occasion as 'the dark side', an attitude commented upon in audience discussions. Such an inherent value judgement has affected the views on the theoretical needs of photography students, perpetuating the view that Cultural Studies approach of understanding meaning and communication in light of ideological frameworks is the ideal intellectual training to make them critical practitioners. Williams, looking back on the development of theory within higher education photography courses, writes that "photography theory at the time shared with media studies the sense that its main purpose was as a critique of mainstream culture and media, while our students were often going out into that same mainstream" (126).

Certainly the view that 'theory' should be a bitter pill to swallow for students is surprisingly prevalent, as is the theoretical prizing of work seen as politically or culturally challenging. Cat photography, for instance, has little academic credibility; the content is considered too cloying, too conventional, too *commercial*. Ironically, Cultural Studies, the foundation of much current photography theory and criticism, deals with popular culture as its main object of investigation. And, yet, as has been noted by Jennings in relation to popular music, "radical is better than popular" according to the hierarchies that are created by the Cultural Studies methodological toolbox. I would suggest that forms of analysis that do not engage, even implicitly, in such critical evaluation are

often viewed with suspicion. Empirical studies that direct analytical focus upon processes are perceived as lacking some sort of 'critical distance'. This distance, it is implied, can only be achieved through evaluation that is politically inflected, especially in relation to commercial practice. My argument here is not to make the case for more positive endorsements of practice that derive solely from their vocational pedagogic value. Rather, I am proposing that valid evaluative judgements on commercial photography ultimately depend upon an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the underpinning production practices, and that the empirical investigations of these practices is of academic and theoretical value in their own right.

On the other hand, a view also exists that the boundaries between photographic types, genres and practices have blurred or even disappeared, largely fuelled by the advent of social media and digitalisation. A broad claim invalidating boundaries in photography is one way for academics to side-step the persistent hierarchy of types of work. If we see images as defying categorisation, then in principle we can discuss any of them without the weight of moral or political judgement either on the images alone or on the intellectual credibility of the analysis. But to do so seems to me to misrepresent the true complexity of photographic production. Such a sweeping generalisation, one that sees all photography as 'communication' regardless of context, or even to argue that photographic work that slides between contexts is 'new', simply does not accurately reflect the different facets of photography currently at play nor does it reflect historical knowledge of contexts of production. To see contemporary photography as without distinctions is disingenuous. Equally, keeping practices separate in order to perpetuate value-laden hierarchies is obstructive. Rather, we need to be able to have intelligent, informed discussion about the commercial image sector without the issue of intellectual or artistic credibility.

My proposition here is not that photography theory should jettison the past or the projects based on meaning analysis and cultural critique that have so motivated much photography theory over the past 50 years. Nor is it to argue against forms of analysis that offer political critiques. What I am suggesting here should provide robust political critiques that have historically often relied on speculative analysis. Photography theory and analysis needs to expand and diversify in order to actively engage with the understanding of commercial production, particularly with an engaged, empirical basis that doesn't stem from the long-standing hierarchy of photography types. Commercial photography's forms of creativity should be investigated within a clear and detailed understanding of the industrial structures – both as constraint and enablement. Film is understood in these ways, giving the discipline both breadth and depth, and Film Production courses have the opportunity to delve into and across and wealth of cognate subject matter and theoretical perspectives. Commercial photography HE courses should have the same opportunity.

Conclusion

My argument here has been that photography theory should expand both its areas of investigation as well as its methodologies in order to tackle two key issues; in the first instance, it would address the notable gap in material that deals with the commercial image sector in a broader and less hierarchical manner. By looking to Film Studies as a model of theoretical diversity, photography theory should look to the development of 'mid-range' theory that encompasses empirical research rather than simply relying upon interpretive frameworks or broad 'contexts' that lack empirical investigation. It should also include examinations of industry practice as a site for understanding creative processes and choices surrounding both form and content. These may be 'critical' in the Cultural Studies tradition, but they may also be investigative and empirical and remain equally academically robust. Commercial images are abundant and widely viewed. They deserve the serious and critical attention that was originally promised under the rubric of 'Visual Culture' studies.

In addition, such a broadening of engagement with research on the commercial sector, both in terms of genre and institutional analysis (and they are often related of course), could also facilitate greater theoretical breadth in the material studied by students on the proliferation of courses that offer a commercial focus. Whether this shift would make for more employable graduates is up for debate. The fact is, we just don't know since the type of research I am proposing with regards to commercial photography has yet to be developed in the first instance, and then integrated into theoretical HE study in the second. Ultimately, employability of graduates is a complex issue that is outside for the remit of my argument here. Rather the breadth of learning for students and depth of academic understanding, which should go hand-in-hand, are of more immediate concern.

Notes

[1] Gathering reading lists was difficult as many lecturers are protective of the teaching content they have developed. I was only able to do so by stating that I would use them anonymously. I was also refused on multiple occasions. In total I gathered 37 reading lists from the same number of modules that are either just theory or mixed theory/practice. They come from 9 different courses that include 3 strictly commercial; 3 photojournalism/documentary; 2 generalist; 1 fine art. Of these courses, 5 have Skillset accreditation, but 7 of the 9 promote themselves in relation to their employability and industry destination of their graduates. All come from post-'92 British HE institutions, a year when many polytechnics and other Further Education colleges were allowed to become Universities.

[2] By 'commercial photographic sector' I mean work circumscribed by some relation to commercial enterprise, i.e. either produced or commissioned work for advertising, branding, packaging or mass-produced product sales such as magazines, calendars, clothing etc.; or else editorial content for PR material, and editorial features, usually for 'softer' content rather than hard core news features. Scott makes the valid argument that all photographic work is commercial if it is part of a commercial transaction, be that as an image sold in a gallery, personal work that is funded, a documentary image that is sold to a newspaper, or a commissioned advertising image. Furthermore, he argues that if a photographer earns a living from photography, in any capacity, then s/he is a professional (i.e. commercial) photographer. I am sympathetic to this view, particularly regarding the problematic hierarchical values attached to the term commercial (the underlying issue to which Scott is responding). But sometimes the distinctions are useful, especially in this case where I am arguing for the engagement with a particular aspect of photography. Furthermore, the term is already in circulation, even if it is problematic, and most theorists would recognise the distinction I am making.

[3] Bate is referring to the work of Steve Neale, one of the foremost theorists on genre in cinema.

[4] EMAP did eventually buy the title in 1999, two years after the 'Sarf Coasting' editorial.

[5] What I have found, at least in the collection of reading lists I have gathered, is that even the Photojournalism course that sits within a Media department does not appear to draw on the in-depth empirical literature save for a few anomalies. *All* of the Photojournalism courses' reading lists are remarkably similar to those of other types of courses, and interestingly draw on 'fine art' texts such as Cotton.

[6] The first degree course was offered in 1972 at Polytechnic of Central London. Even the pioneering courses at Derby College of Art & Design and Newport College of Art were diploma courses for many years, the latter actively resisting "degree-ification" until 1989 (McWilliams 250)

[7] HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) data suggests a 39% increase in HE level Photography courses with a 37% increase in overall enrolment between 2008-09 and 2013-14. See Table 1b and Table 4 in particular on the HESA website.

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