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Why is narrative such a difficult concept for young photographers to master?

Grant Scott

I have written previously of the commonly held belief by writers that reading is the foundation of good writing. That's all reading of course, the good, the mediocre, the bad and the truly awful with no boundaries placed on where the written word appears or how or why it was created. I draw an analogy with this and the teaching of photography as a visual language and I'd now like to extend that analogy to the logical outlet for connective elements of language - the narrative.

The love of reading is something which those of us who enjoy reading can take as a given but in a formal education environment in which reading is often seen as an enforced chore, the early childhood joy of reading can easily and quickly be extinguished. The result of this is a rejection of all forms of reading and as a result of the narrative. When I've asked students hoping to commence their photography studies at university what they read I have invariably been met with a sense of confusion. Why would I ask about books when they want to study photography? This confusion continues as I question them about films they have recently seen and film directors they admire. Of course the connecting element in both of these creative forms is narrative and it is an enjoyment and awareness of storytelling that I am searching for in their popular cultural influences. Sadly, it is rarely evident.

This linking of creative practices and the willingness to question and enquire seems to be rare amongst a generation for whom the ability to discover has never been so easy or so available. What is however, easier to understand is not only the rejection of reading but the obsession with the single image. In many ways the reason for both of these negative situations can I believe be attributed to the digital platforms that have done so much good in connecting the global photographic community.

The limited character count of the tweet and the scrutiny of the single image on Instagram can reduce both attention span and the opportunity to develop complex and nuanced storytelling. Both platforms can be extremely positive elements within a photographers professional practice but they can also dominate not only the presentation of the images but also their creation. These are platforms where both long and short form narratives can be effectively showcased, but for this to happen the photographer needs to understand the construction of narrative not only through creation but also through editing.

The art of editing is a skill that can often take years to master based on shooting experience and developed visual knowledge, so it would be unrealistic to expect the novice photographer to immediately master the ability to know which images lead, drive and deliver a narrative. Many student photographers have only known their own images as back-lit screen based outcomes, viewed at a size and number dictated by the size of the screen they are viewing them on. I believe that it is essential to encourage students to step away from the digital screen as a primary editing environment and to print their work cheaply and quickly at a size that allows them to view their work clearly and layout their images on a floor space where they can begin to see them as a developing body of work. This is nothing new to the experienced photographer but my experience tells me that this is often a revelation of thinking and seeing for many young photographers.

Digital platforms and the way in which students engage with them must take some responsibility for the lack of awareness of the importance of narrative in visual storytelling as must the process by which they view their work on screen, but it is in the understanding of the storytelling power of photography where I think most work needs to be done by the

lecturer or teacher. Encouraging students to see photography as something more than the creation of a 'successful' single image requires them to see the importance of narrative in story-telling in aligned creative practice from song lyrics to a news articles, from a short story to a feature film. Areas with creative synergy to photography, but not always obviously so to the student photographer.

Without an engagement with an understanding of narrative outside of photographic practice combined with an enjoyment of storytelling it is impossible to develop narrative as a photographer. It is also extremely difficult to teach narrative to people who have never considered narrative as an essential aspect of photography.

When discussing the connection between moving image creation and stills photography with photographers I often use the analogy between the traditional analogue contact sheet and the importance of a storyboard to a filmmaker. The sense of a narrative developing through a series of consecutive images is easy to explain from this perspective but with digital stills capture the images are rarely seen and studied in this context of narrative progression.

Why is narrative such a difficult concept for young photographers to master? Because it is a concept that they are unaware of. It is something that they take for granted and do not question, something that visual digital sharing platforms do not encourage. Because it is something that is pushed to the back of the educational queue in favour of technical skills, post-production proficiency and other photographic aspects that fulfil an easily implemented marking matrix. And yet just as with writing the establishment of a clearly defined, developed narrative is the foundation of all successful storytelling.