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Where Are We Now with the Moving Image?

It would be difficult not to notice the proliferation of documentary based filmmaking over the past few years and it would be almost impossible to have not witnessed the rise of moving image content online. It is now nearly ten years since the launch of the Canon 5DMKII and the resulting 'convergence' conversations and debate, and now as I sit writing this in 2017 moving image functionality is an accepted aspect of most of our still cameras. Like it or not the moving image is part of the photographer's world.

The beginning of 2009 saw filmmakers – but very few photographers – energised by the possibilities the 5D MKII offered them, opportunities to use lenses they previously could not afford, to get shots they previously could not get, to shoot in situations they previously could not film in and perhaps most importantly to tell stories they previously could not afford to tell. Skilled in the arts of narrative, audio capture, film editing and photography – many had studied photography as part of their creative education – filmmakers saw the new technology as a natural extension of their existing practice. Photographers did not.

However, those that were willing to learn new skills found themselves able to evolve their storytelling creativity, develop collaborative elements of their practice and fulfil a client need for moving image online content. No negatives there then so why were and still are so many photographers reticent to engage with the moving image? Fear of the unknown is the unspoken answer I most often sense. An answer wrapped up in a belief that photographers should only create stills and that filmmaking is for the filmmakers, let's not confuse those two practices they seem to say because they are completely different. Well maybe to some but not to myself and many others like me.

There is a long history of photographers working in both stills and the moving image that stretches way back before digital convergence to photographers such as Paul Strand, Man Ray and Alexander Rodchenko, but there are two reasons why today the two lens based practices are both so intrinsically linked and important to visual storytellers and those reasons are capture and dissemination.

We all know that our camera's capture moving image at a quality that is acceptable for online use but it is where and how this material can now be used that has opened-up the true potential of that initial capture. The loosening of once rigid and restrictive tech requirements by media organizations such as the BBC has opened the flood gates for DSLR captured content to be broadcast nationally and internationally to previously unreachable audiences. And for it to be seen on broadcast networks that instantly instil a sense of seriousness within the work based on those networks histories and cultural standing.

However, it has been with the new boy on the block Netflix that the documentary film has found its true home. As a new broadcaster, desperate for content Netflix have been eager to embrace the new approach to documentary as feature film, not only in length but also in aesthetic. Pro audio is now widely available, and DSLR cameras with experienced grading achieve the cinematic values we all now take for granted online, on television and in our cinemas. These developments have been as influential within the world of filmed drama but

it is the factual documentary based work that photographers have seemed most comfortable embracing.

This work is generally recognised as filmmaking and it would be accurate to say that this form of documentary requires many of the skills and understanding which lay at the heart of traditional filmmaking and photographic practice. But there is a subsidiary area of film work that exists between photography and filmmaking and that is moving image. Short in length and often loose in its narrative structure, moving image exists as a natural evolution of the music video.

The door to documentary film dissemination was opened by the easing of broadcast technical specifications, but moving image was enabled by the increase in broadband width and the subsequent increase in download speeds. The resulting rise of platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo alongside commercial brand demands for website content to aid SEO success has seen a vibrant and highly creative new area of moving image creation flourish. This is particularly true within the fashion world where designers are now using moving image to promote and market their work outside of the traditional catwalk/fashion show format. Platforms such as www.showstudio.com – founded and overseen by the photographer Nick Knight – and www.nowness.com – owned by the fashion/lifestyle mega-brand LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessey) – are leading the way in the evolution of the short film moving image format from fashion to music, from interiors to portraiture.

Over the last seven years the film icon button on your camera has established new areas of income generation, areas of creativity and collaborative possibilities but whereas seven years ago the fear amongst many photographers was that they would be forced to become filmmakers the reality today is very different. Markets have been established and the landscape has settled. You are either engaged with stills and the moving image, or you are not and the two areas of practice seem to be co-habiting the photographic environment with little friction. However, there is a little voice that keeps speaking to me that I cannot dismiss from my mind. It is the voice of an established New York based stills photographer who now also shoots moving image for a range of different clients and it says this “Why wouldn’t I use it if it helps me explore my creativity?” A good point well made.

Where are we now with the moving image? It’s an area that is growing that has multiple access points for photographers to engage with it, at its most basic form it is available to anyone with a digital camera, whether that is at high end or smartphone level and it offers opportunities to develop your practice, but if you want to ignore it you can. Moving image hasn’t killed the still image but it has superseded it in some areas, complimented it in others and had no impact at all on many photographers. I embraced digital moving image in its earliest days and now find myself working on a self-financed, micro-budget, self-initiated feature length documentary film that will exist with cinema spaces, broadcast channels and as a DVD, a project I could never have considered prior to the moving image revolution. I still shoot stills for clients and I am comfortable with what I know as a photographer and what I am learning as a filmmaker. The description of my practice is now ‘visual storyteller’ and the form that story takes depends upon the format most appropriate to tell that story. I am happy to push all the buttons on my camera, are you?

Grant Scott is the founder/curator of United Nations of Photography, a Senior Lecturer in Editorial and Advertising Photography at the University of Gloucestershire, a working photographer, and the author of Professional Photography: The New Global Landscape Explained (Focal Press 2014) and The Essential Student Guide to Professional Photography (Focal Press 2015). His next book #New Ways of Seeing: The Democratic Language of Photography will be published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2018.

You can follow the progress of his documentary film Do Not Bend: The Photographic Life of Bill Jay at www.donotbendfilm.com.

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