From rags to riches: Democratisation of the photographic art

Associate Professor Michael D Sankey
Director, Learning Environments and Media
University of Southern Queensland
Queensland, Australia, 4350

Brief Biography:
Michael is the Director, Learning Environments and Media at the University Southern Queensland. He specialises in multimodal design, visual and multi-literacies, photography e-learning pedagogies and technology enhanced learning. He has worked in Higher Education for over 24 years and is particularly interested in how constructively aligned and aesthetically enhanced learning environments can better transmit concepts to students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. Prior to his Academic career, Michael was a professional photographer for 20 years after graduating from Prahran College of Advanced Education, having been under the tutelage of Athol Smith and John Cato.

Abstract
The democratisation of photography has gone hand-in-hand with the advent of the devices used for the ubiquitous production of images speaking to an individual's engagement with the world. As the various photographic formats have changed over the years, largely aligned with the impact of the medium/cameras used, it's interesting to note how the different forms of photography; social, constructed, manipulated and even commercial, are now largely facilitated by the online space, and how this has introduced a new universal immediacy and a renewed sense of intermediality to the art. This serves to highlight further that the photographic medium is less important than the underlying social component it facilitates. In other words, it's all about the relationship between the subject matter, the artist and how the two provide a unique perspective on our world. This paper will explore how 'the image' in the digital age has enhanced the possibilities of this unique form of unfettered communication, particularly in this era of the 'new-media' phenomena. It will do this by investigating, visually, the corporeality of perception in visual communications and how this has shifted our attention from the 'interaction of media' towards the 'interaction with media'. This paper will then interrogate the idea of 'media borders' and contextualise this discussion through an analysis of some common examples that serve to blur an individual's perception between media and reality; demonstrating that the image is being perceived not just as a form of representation, but as an environment used to 'augment' reality.

Key Words:
Intermediality, Instagram, Photography, democratisation, visual communication

From rags to riches: Democratisation of the photographic art

Introduction

The democratisation of photography (Johnson 2011) has gone hand-in-hand with the advent of the devices used to allow for the ubiquitous production of images that speak to an individual's interaction and engagement with the world around them. From the Kodak Instamatic (my first camera), to the Polaroid Land Camera, to the digital point and shoot, then to the iPhone (mobile device) and now to Instagram, as the various photographic formats have changed over the years, largely aligned with the impact of the medium/cameras used, it's interesting to note how the different forms of photography; social, constructed, manipulated and even commercial, are now largely facilitated by the online space, and how this has introduced a new universal immediacy and a renewed sense of intermediality to the art. This of course is in no small part largely due to unrestricted access to the ubiquitous internet and internet protocols that have made images so easily accessible for well over two decades now (Margaritidis & Polyzos, 2001). However, this only serves to highlight further that the photographic medium is less important than its underlying social component. In other words, it's all about the relationship between the subject matter, the artist and how the two provide a unique perspective on our world, and ultimately make these public, or keep them private.

This paper explores, both theoretically and visually, how 'the image' in the digital age has enhanced the possibilities of this unique form of unfettered communication, particularly in this era of the 'new-media' phenomena. It will do this by investigating the corporeality of perception in visual communications and how this has shifted our attention from the 'interaction of media' towards the 'interaction with media'. This paper will then interrogate the idea of democratisation and contextualise this discussion through an analysis of some common examples that serve to blur an individual's perception between media and reality; demonstrating that the image is being perceived not just as a form of representation, but as an environment in itself and as a means to 'augment' reality.

The paradox of democratization

For photography, there is a double paradox, or maybe it is a double edged sword, either way it is testing the resilience of those who have fought to see photography accepted as 'art'. Firstly, this paradox lies in the fact that photography has traditionally had a tenuous relationship with the 'traditional' arts and has not always been welcomed as a 'main-stream' art form, at least not until reasonably recently (the last 25 years, but maybe a bit longer in the United States). This has been primarily due to photography being "dogged by the accusation that it was too instant and effortless to be real art" (O'Hagan, 2011). The second part of this paradox lies in the fact that, "the more the cultural goods of our time are democratized, the more uncertain the place of the artist becomes" (Molina 2006). However, what we have seen (experienced), particularly since the advent of digital photography, is that while the photographic medium itself has become more democratized (I will come back to this) those who would hold the medium up as a means by which to create 'meaningful' art have moved their practice more into the realm of the conceptual, introducing a new level of intermediality into their practice (Ellenstrom 2010).

But on the other hand, if we accept these paradoxes, do we not invariably run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater? That is, those very things that made photography so attractive as an art form cannot be disregarded or ditched. Now, for those who are required to make judgments about such things, people like gallery curators and theorists, this makes the distinctions between art photography and conceptual art (using photography) increasingly hard to maintain (O'Hagan, 2011). So in practice what we now see is the evolution of two very distinct spaces for the dissemination of photography as 'art', the physical space and the digital space, the tangible and the virtual and the mash-up of these, the intermedial, or multimodal space and this mainly facilitated by the Internet.

So why is photography being singled out here beyond that of other, more traditional forms of art production? Well, it has to do with the evolution of its technological skin (Baňuelos 2013); on its

journey from its analogue roots (requiring advanced skills), then to the digital (requiring some skills) and now to mobile (requiring no particular skills), providing 24x7 access. In doing so we have moved from the camera with film and chemicals and paper, all used across multiple locations, to the phone and the internet all in the one device, with the requisite actions being performed within minutes, rather than hours or days. So unlike any other tool or medium used to create visual art, a paintbrush and canvas, a pencil and paper, clay and a wheel, wood and tools, metal and welder, all of which take a reasonably high level of skill to create something of meaning, the camera, on the other hand, can now basically be used by anybody to create seemingly lovely pictures. It is a simple as pulling one's phone out of one's pocket and pointing it at the red sunset (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Instagram: michael_sankey, Hong Kong International Airport: The #sunset in #hongkong tonight. #stunning

As this paper progresses we will investigate, visually, the corporeality of perception in visual communications and how this has shifted our attention from the 'interaction of media' towards the 'interaction with media', through what Kress (2010) calls the 'new media' phenomenon, where it is suggested that the major shift in the way we communicate lies in the increasing use of the image, where previously the written word would have been used. This paper will then visually interrogate the idea of 'media borders' and contextualize this discussion through an analysis of examples of my personal work which serves to illustrate how some of the boundaries have been blurred around individual perception and between media and reality. This is done to demonstrate that the image is being perceived not just as a form of representation, but as part of an environment, and one that is being used as a means to 'enhance' or 'augment' reality.

Intermediality and multimodality

So, we now have 'the image' in the mobile/digital age, along with its enhanced capability to open unique forms of unfettered intermedial communication, almost seamlessly bridging with the era of the 'new-media' phenomena (Kress 2010). To place an organizing framework or context around this discussion the term 'intermediality' (Ellenstrom 2010) has been invoked to provide a solid foundation on which to build a scaffold that will support the proposition of democratisation within contemporary image making. Although this construct relies heavily on the various modalities of 'new media', it has proved to be an enduring concept in photography and one that allows us to contextualize the discussion in the domain of 'visualization as communication' (Sandor, 2010). However, not to stretch this concept too far, intermediality is best understood as a bridge between the medial differences that are founded on 'multimodality, or "the combination of, say, text, image and sound, and sometimes to the combination of sense faculties; the auditory, the visual, the tactile and so forth" (Ellenstrom, p.14).

It is important to note that every medium is ultimately modally 'mixed', in a way that is more or less unique, allowing different kinds of intermedial blends with other media consisting of divergent modal combinations (Ellenstrom, 2010). So where in the past we might have called our practice multimodal, and it still is, the internet allows it also to be even 'more' intermedial. In other words intermediality has largely been facilitated by the online space. Or, the online space has largely made it possible for intermedial practice to flourish; to be disseminated and experienced.

An understanding of intermedial relations underlies the accelerated multiplication of the various forms of media (photography, animation, video and graphic design, etc.) in our daily experience and it has propelled the validity of this concept through a great number of communication disciplines. Therefore, one way to analyze this is by focusing on the wide array of intermedial and multimodal phenomena that currently exist (Ellenstrom 2010) and the new types of relationships that are being formed, thanks to 'new media' this is now largely facilitated by the online space. We have to look no further than the internet and more particularly social media to see this at play in our lives.

The power of the online space verses the conceptual space, moving towards

democratization

The heading of this section posits an either or, but nothing could be further from the truth. The two, the online space and the conceptual space are now inseparable. However, it should not be forgotten that contemporary visual practice is very much informed by what has gone before. In our context this leads us to investigate how pre-digital media (in this case photography) can be re-evaluated, and how historical paradigms of intermediality may already be distinguishable and viewed from the standpoint of contemporary image production. This is really important, as the photographic medium is continuously mutating, relocating and expanding, drawing on its connections from the 'old' to the 'new', whilst being established with incredible fluidity, thanks to its history and the democratic processes that now informs its practitioners.

Of course the notion of the conceptual space has been present in photography since its inception. It wasn't long after photography was invented that people were starting to manipulate the medium to make it tell their particular story in a visually compelling way. It was not unusual for images to be retouched with ink or paint, to have double-exposures on film and paper; all techniques that were adopted very early on for propaganda and marketing purposes. However, this was almost taken for granted until photography wanted to be taken seriously as an art form and to have image manipulation became an alternate form of photographic expression in its own right. This is clearly exemplified, in the modern era, by proponents such as Duane Michals, pushing the visual boundaries of manipulation to new heights from the early 1960s, by creating intermedial fictions and staged narratives. In fact it was said of Michals that "'Photographer' is not exactly an apt title for Duane Michals; poet would be better suited." (David Seidner, 1987), an interesting title for a man who made his living, in those days, from being a photojournalist.

Of course this was well before the advent of the Photoshop and the Internet, which only goes to reinforce the fact that intermedial practice has been present all along, but was more so legitimized by the work of Michals and much early proponents, such as Alfred Steiglitz and Edward Steichen who led the Photo-Secession movement. In this movement pictures and photographic materials were manipulated to emulate the painting and etching of the early 1900's (some 100 years ago). Therefore, this group can be credited with promoting the photographic medium as a fine art by seeking to raise the standards and awareness of photography as an art, particularly in America and Europe, and without really being aware of it (as it wasn't referred to in these terms) solidified the foundation for today's intermedial practice.

So what has really changed? Sure we have moved from analogue to digital. But this was not the cruncher, as all the digital camera actually did, initially, was replace the need for film. But what was the real game changer was the ability to share ones images with whoever was willing to view them, along with those who couldn't really care. So within less than two decades the phenomenon of digital imaging grew exponentially thanks to the advent of, and almost ubiquitous access to, the Internet, but more particularly due to the advent of social media (Hdz, 2012) and mobile photography. This, says Sean O'Hagan (2011), "has changed everything". Jacob Baňuelos (2013) concurs when he writes:

> "Mobile photography creates a new paradigm in the production, dissemination, consumption and evaluation of the photographic image, which, since its inception has evolved by changing its technological skin and impacting societies in their cultural, aesthetic, economic, social and political construction.

Consequently, as the rate of image making has increased, and the price of cameras has steadily been falling (measured against the average income), and as the cameras within our phones get better and better, more and more image making is expanding. "So, if the audience expands, if the prices come down, aren't we in essence dealing with a process of democratization?" (Mayer 2007)

The following diagram (Figure 2) attempts to chart this shift. It shows that (from the top down) the days of analogue photography have almost fully past, with the exception of some purists (traditionalists/enthusiasts). This coincides, not unsurprisingly, with the advent of digital cameras (early 1990s), where for a while the mediums lived in an awkward coexistence. It should be noted

that at about this same time the Internet really began to take-off also, as 'digital' became the economy. More recently (since 2007) as the cameras in mobile phones began to significantly improve, along with the ability to access the Internet from this same device, images were/are able to be shared quite effortlessly. It was then not long until social media began to become more and more popular, initially with the advent of Facebook (with a few forerunners) but more recently (2010) Instagram, where the intermedial image (that is image, text and interaction) is the main currency of trade.

2014

The days of analogue — the later days

The days of digital

Early 1990's

The days of mobile

2007

Intermedial multimodal practice

1930s

The WWW — 2.5+ billion users

Early 1990's

2004

Facebook — 800+ million users

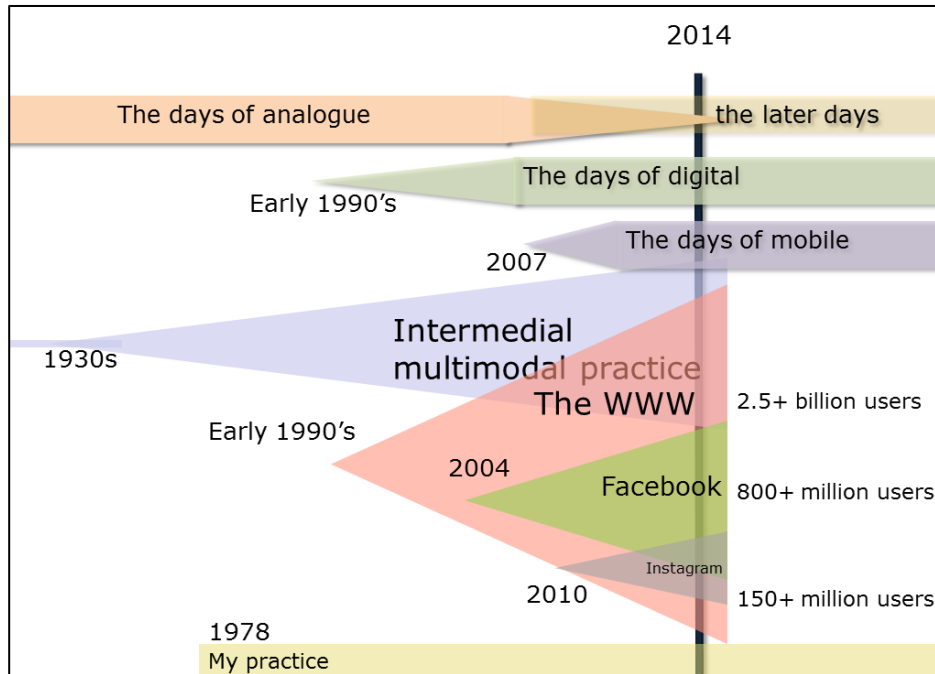Instagram

2010 — 150+ million users

1978

My practice

Figure 2. The unique phases of image making, intermediality and the Internet

What we see though, as Figure 2 tries to illustrate, is that, with the advent of the Internet, all of a sudden the ability to share ones images with the world expanded exponentially. So once where I may have exhibited in a gallery (and still do from time to time) in my local community, and in where I may get a couple of hundred people walk through the doors, the internet opens up for me (and anybody else for that matter) a potential pool of two and a half billion users world-wide. Not only can I put up an image online, I can write about my image and other people can write about my image. I can, and do, syndicate that same [one] image through multiple channels (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Tumblr, my ePortfolio, just to mention a few) making it available to multiple audiences. They can see it, download it, adjust it, and even share it. That is sounding strangely like democratization. So the boundaries of my image making have expanded, but in a sense have also been diminished, in that, what was mine and hung on the gallery wall (within a secure boundary) with my signature on it, now resides in a completely open space (with very few boundaries), and yet my work is seen and admired by more people than ever before, but the boundary of protection has disappeared.

How this is played out in my reality

In this section, I will demonstrate the paradigm shift in photography over the last 40 years by investigating, visually, the shift in perceptions associated with my own image making practice over this time. I will demonstrate that the idea of 'media borders' have started to dissolve, or blur how individual's perceive media and reality; demonstrating that the image is being perceived not just as a form of intermedial representation, but as an environment in and of itself.

My image making dates back to the late 1970's where I adopted a very traditional view of image making, where the boundary of the frame was the black line around the image that was formed by the edge of the negative

Figure 3. 'At the Teddy Bears Picnic in Melbourne', 1978

(Figure 3) and capturing the 'decisive moment' was the driving force. This (use of the black line) continued on through until the early 1990s, but in doing so I started to see the image as more a place in which I could stage a creative activity and capture it. At this stage I started to introduce a much more playful approach to my image making and began the process of looking back to the history of the medium, particularly in relation to the manipulation of images, and across to other mediums; painting, performance and printmaking.

Figure 4. 'Scary monsters', from Camera obscurities and recent developments, 1991

The advent of digital imaging opened the floodgates for this in my practice. Not only was I now able to capture what I wanted (out of context) and have that easily manipulated in Photoshop, but it allowed me introduce a new level of pathos and nostalgia into my work and to juxtapose different conceptual levels in a far more multimodal (or intermedial) way. By 1996, I had introduced digital imaging into my practice, along with the notion of performance, but was still displaying this in a very traditional art space; the gallery. So in the 'Death of Constable Scanlon (Ned Jones)' and its associated image, we see the juxtaposition of nostalgia, the introduction of pathos, and the interplay of cross media practice and performance.
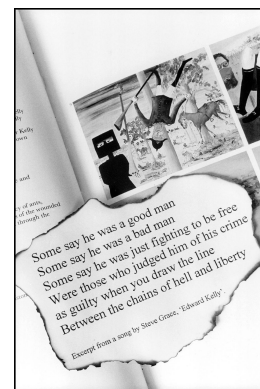

Figure 5 'Death of Constable Scanlon (Ned Jones)' and the 'Death of Constable Scanlon, appropriated', from Differing Views, 1996
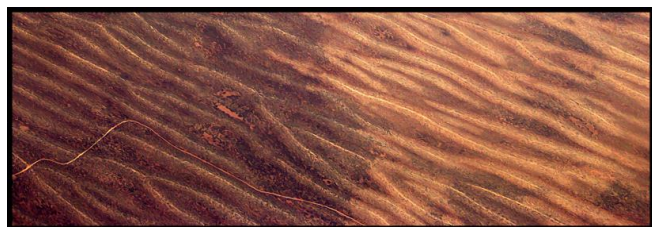

Figure 6. 'Dessert channels from 30,000 feet', from Slithers, 2008.

By the early 2000s and through that first decade (2001- 2011), what was captured by the camera, in simple terms being colour and light, became even more like an open canvas in which I could play and create. The image capture became the beginning of the process. From there I would work (manipulate) the pixels of colour like I was using a paintbrush, or pallet knife and the pixels where the paint to be splashed onto the canvas. This became a different form of intermedial practice. By now I was using the internet more and associating these images with text, by way of static webpages. The images were to be seen by the world, but they would also still see the gallery wall.

Figure 7. **Instagram:** michael_sankey. From left to right, 'Keeping an eye on Saint Sebastian', 'The Sydney Myer Music Bowl revisited. Last here in 1977. This time no Teddy Bears Picnic', 'The Death of Constable Scanlon revisited. With homage to Sydney Nolan', 'Instagram on Instagram'.

By the time I got my first iPhone the Internet and social media were really starting to explode and what better place, I thought, to share my work than this unfettered space. The static webpage gave way to an ePortfolio, that allowed for the syndication of my images from multiple platforms; Predominantly from Instagram. In this space I could play with nostalgia, revisit past glories, restage

events, reflect and still capture the decisive moment Complete with black line.

Conclusion

We see that contemporary visual practice is very much informed by what has gone before, particularly in relation to nostalgia and pathos as we re-investigate ideas and probe new boundaries. This leads us to re-evaluate how pre-digital media relations and the historical paradigms of intermediality are distinguishable in contemporary image production. It's important to understand this context, as the medium has continued to mutate, relocate and expand, it is drawing on its connections from the 'old' to the 'new'. But it does this whilst still being incredible fluid, thanks to the democratising processes that inform its evolving practices. Where I might have called my practice 'multimodal', and it still is, the Internet allows me to be far more intermedial. In other words, intermediality, for me, has largely been facilitated by the online space. Or, the online space has made it possible for my intermedial practice to flourish; to be disseminated and to be experienced more broadly. So, intermediality (which incorporates notions of multimodality) is not just about the medium of photography – it's also about how and where the viewer (you) experiences and interacts with my work. And hopefully they (you) will like it.

Figure 8. 'Like', 2014

References

Baňuelos, J. (2013) 'iPhoneographs; Photography with mobile devices', *Zone Zero: From the lightscreen*. Available at:
http://v2.zonezero.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1399&catid=2&Itemid=7&lang=en#

Crerar, S. (2013). Democratisation of photography spawns grassroots movement. ABC – Arts site, available from: www.abc.net.au/**arts**/stories/s3765688.htm Posted May 23, 2013.

Elleström, L. (2010). Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality. Palgrave Macmillan. Johnson, S. (2011) The Democratization of Photography. *The Minimalist Photographer*. Available online at: http://minimalistphotography101.com/democratization-of-photography/

Hdz, E. 2012. The most photographed generation in history. *Zone Zero Magazine* (27 June) Retrieved from:
http://v2.zonezero.com/index.php?option=com_alphacontent&view=alphacontent&Itemid=9&lang=en

Kress, G. (2010) *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Routledge, London.

Margaritidis, M & Polyzos, G, 2001. Adaptation techniques for Ubiquitous Internet multimedia. , Wireless Communication and Mobile Computing. 1*(2)* 141-163.

Mayer, P. 2007. The democratic image, photography and globalization. Zone Zero Magazine (30 April). Retrieved from:
http://v2.zonezero.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1006%3Athe-democratic-image-photography-and-globalization&catid=5%3Aarticles&lang=en

Molina, J. A. (2006) 'Jumping into the Void. Photography in the age of distracted delight'. Zone Zero: From the lightscreen. Available from:
http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/zonacritica/saltaralvacio/index.html

Miller, T. (2013) Situating images: Photography, writing, and cinema in the work of Guy Debord. In K. Beckman and L. Weissberg (Ed's) *On Writing with Photography*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

O'Hagan, S. (2011).'On photography: Britain's photographic revolution'. The Observer Newspaper. London, 30 October. Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/oct/30/v-a-photographs-gallery-tate

Prats, F. (2013) 'On mobile photography, Photography with a capital 'P' and postphotography, from an anti-digital dualist perspective'. *iPhoneographs* , *Photography with mobile devices'* Zone Zero: From the lightscreen. Available at: http://v2.zonezero.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1399&catid=2&Itemid=7&lang=en#

Sandor, K. (2010) Photo/graphic Traces in Dubravka Ugresic's: The Museum of Unconditional Surrender. In L. Ellestrom. (Ed) *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Seidner, D. 1987. Artists in Conversation: Duane Michals. *BOMB Magazine* (20) Summer. Retrieved from: http://bombmagazine.org/article/923/duane-michals