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Teaching Photography as a Visual Language

Grant Scott

It is interesting to me that those born since the digital revolution; the students whom populate our schools, colleges and universities seem to have the hardest time in re-imagining the role of photography in the world today. At least that is my experience when speaking to them about their understanding of photography as a subject to study within some form of further or higher education. There is an understanding defined and sculpted by established education's need to grade, mark and rate both work and students throughout their learning journey. As with so many of the creative arts the study of photography is too often placed within the same results based criteria as any other subject from maths to biology, from a modern language to geography. This causes fundamental issues for the student who decides to continue their study of photography outside of that criteria. It has been in the process of trying to solve these issues that I have chosen to use the metaphor of 'learning a language' in my own teaching when attempting to explain what photography can be and what it can give a student in transferable creative and life skills.

This process of 're-education' begins with the student pre-conception that successful photography is defined by the successful single image or 'the good photograph'. The idea that the creation of one single image can define a young photographer's ability and vision is of course as ridiculous a suggestion as to suggest that by learning one single word in a foreign language is akin to being fluent in that language. It is by establishing this concept of language that I begin to construct an understanding of photography as a process of visual story telling in which images are words, series of images are sentences and paragraphs and bodies of work become completed or evolving stories. The importance of narrative within photography is then aligned to a sense of narrative already learned through more traditional study of language construction and presentation. The successful single image can of course come from a series of images just as a beautifully written paragraph or sentence can come from a chapter but the pre-conceived idea of what constitutes a successful image will then be seen as a demonstration of technical proficiency or given aesthetic implementation of course learning created to meet a marking matrix.

When learning a language various exercises are utilized to understand aspects such as grammar and syntax but when I begin teaching photography as a language I utilize just one exercise and it is one that is the most appropriate to the demographic of those I am teaching. The smartphone is the one camera I can guarantee that all of my student's own and Instagram is the platform that most of them use to share their images so those are the tools I use to help them begin to see light, form, texture, explore juxtapositions and consider composition, what I consider to be the syntax and grammar of photography. I call this process 'photosketching' and by searching #photosketching on Instagram you will be able to see this exercise in progress.

It is fascinating how so many students have never considered the images they post on platforms such as Instagram as being 'photography'. Many have a disconnect between this and what they understand to be 'serious photography' despite their fluidity with adopting and adapting digital technology. However, I have found that the description of photography as a visual language and the use of appropriate metaphors not only gets students to see photography as something liberating but also more relevant to their lives and passions.

Of course exercises in seeing are exactly that 'exercises' and as they are explored and mastered they need to lead to a relevance of implementation. It is at this point that the understanding of narrative as the foundation for visual storytelling becomes both relevant and essential. It is also in my experience one of the most difficult aspects for student photographers to grasp and implement.

It is a truism amongst writers that to be a better writer you need to read more and as a visual storyteller the requirement to both read and see are the keys to understanding narrative. Unfortunately, it is also true that for a myriad of reasons including an over reliance on digital platforms students read less and less widely today than they have ever done and look at too few photographers work as a body of work rather than a single image. This lack of reading and seeing impacts on a student's ability to understand narrative which in turn has led me to use the works of authors and songwriters such as Joseph Conrad, JD Salinger, Bob Dylan and Jack Kerouac amongst others alongside photographers work within workshops dealing with narrative visual storytelling. This continuation of the language metaphor when teaching photography further emphasizes the power of the photograph as a piece of personal communication.

By re-configuring the language used around photography its relevance to modern day society and as a tool for true personal expression become clear to students whose previous understanding of photography is based upon post-production, lighting techniques and out dated subject briefs which ignore the student's personal passions, interests and life experiences. Teaching photography as a visual language not only encourages the student to think differently about the stories they want to tell but also its connections with storytelling encourage the student to explore areas of reading and research that they previously dismissed as part of academic subject learning they were perhaps too quick to leave behind.

Of course the easiest way for me to explain the concept of photography as a visual language to my students is the easiest. I ask how often they post and send pictures to their friends without writing an associated comment or caption, how often do they use snapchat to send humorous images to each other without words of explanation, how often do they put images on Instagram and receive likes from people to whom sharing the same spoken language is of no importance. Of course we all know the answer to these rhetorical questions and that answer is every day. It is at this point that the penny drops, and they realize that photography is not only a visual language but it is also a universal language which when mastered is the most powerful form of communication we have today.

Grant Scott is the founder/curator of the 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).

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