**Visual literacy & Photographic Authorship**

This presentation examines a claim made by a prominent art director that if he sees a photograph he likes, he knows instinctively that he will like the photographer – such is the absolute connection between artist and image – hence this paper looks at the importance of authorship. It is an empirical study that draws on observations of guest speaker interactions in tutorial sessions at The University of the West of England and The Arts University College Bournemouth. It also considers the question of whether HE Photography teaching should encourage the pursuit of a ‘visual voice’ or brand, and if so how?

This paper is based on extremely slack empirical data, hearsay in fact. Some years ago, when I was teaching at Bournemouth, I went to interview a photographer who related an anecdote to me concerning the art director Stephen Male. Put in simple terms Male claimed that if he saw a photograph he liked he would always like the photographer and similarly if he met a photographer and liked them he would also like their work. I was hoping to substantiate my information by contacting Stephen to find out if the claim was entirely accurate, but he’s a bit busy having very recently become a dad. The door therefore remains ajar for me to pontificate and mythologize and not have denials undermine the paper completely.

His claim initially struck me as boastful bravura, as if Male was investing into a modernist mythology or notion of romantic authorship that belonged to a dated discourse; (**SLIDE)** like Truffaut fetishising Hitchcock’s ‘camera pen’ or Greenberg talking about Pollock wielding the brush like a lasso or a whip. He seemed to give credence to an old school, Beaumont Newhall idea of the genius of photography, rather than the kind of discourse theory that I was peddling at the time which sought to distance itself from the importance of authorship. It also ran counter to the broader public perception of photography as an anonymous guileless act of recording which, as Bourdieu, Barthes and others have pointed out, lies at the heart of photography’s perceived veracity and therefore its power to convince.

He was privileging the authorship of the photograph in the best traditions of independent photography outlined by Peter Turner in the 80s and endorsed by other great art directors such as **(SLIDE)** Phil Bicker, Male’s opposite number at *The Face*, when he himself was at iD during the late 80s and early 90s. It took me a while to realise that modernist principles like Male’s, despite the broader perception of the medium, lie at the very heart of photographic discourse and that these are definitely not confined to its fine art manifestations.

The anecdote stayed with me and formed the basis of a lot of my teaching sessions and research. That is: interrogating the authorship involved in photographic practice in the face of a culture that appears to be polarised in its relationship to it. It is, at least for the time being, supported by legal copyright and yet in commercial terms the creative latitude given to photographers is largely in thrall to the agenda of the client, the art director, the account manager, and a host of other individuals that ‘collaborate’ with s/he that produces the image. There is no doubt that this process has strong creative problem solving elements, but it is a fundamentally different process than stand alone work. Those who operate within the discourse of photography from a pedagogic perspective, often favour a ‘project based’ approach to photography that puts the photographer in an autonomous position, or at the top of a collaborative hierarchy, rather than wanting to replicate the unforgiving nature of the commercial marketplace in which the photographer very often operates as a gun for hire. But in teaching this way am I simply setting students up for a fall?

Even ‘commercially orientated’ courses tend to do this because they are aware of how the system operates – in other words if you want to get the money gigs, you have to co-operate with the modernist culture of photography typified by Male, in which the practitioner needs to demonstrate over and over that they are worthy of investment. Art directors, Art buyers, informed clients, etc. want the assurance that they are buying into an artist – someone who has proven creative skills, a strong brand, or in the case of young photographers, great potential. It is a romantic narrative, and I’m thankful for it, because at least it retains the notion of the photographic artist. Writers such as Howard Rheingold and Henry Jenkins have been promising us a paradigm shift towards a much more balanced collaborative working relationship for some time, but I see scant evidence of it in commercial photography, or any other creative industry for that matter.

There are three distinct reasons why I can’t now reject Male’s claim. The first is to do with romanticising the photographic process myself and enjoying it’s indulgent outcomes in the shape of books and exhibitions; in which inevitably seek the voice of the maker.

the second is the fact that Male is so good at what he does, both in terms of the day job at employers such as **(SLIDE)** iD, American Vogue, Levi’s, Karrimor, Caterpillar, etc and his labours of love like the design of Clare Richardson’s fabulous 2005 book *Beyond the Forest* **(SLIDE x 2)**; the third comes from my experience of teaching photography students and witnessing others teach, over the past ten years, particularly the small army of guest speakers that I’ve had the privilege of working with.

I’ve seen a lot of people from the photography industry conduct project and portfolio reviews with students, often after a lecture they’ve just delivered, and a lot of them were excellent. Dealing with students’ labours of love in a few minutes is never easy and people clearly bring different skill sets, agendas and attitudes to the encounter. The ability to boldly critique is a rarity. Unless people have teaching experience, they often don't want to upset students – so the advice they offer is very polite and tentative. But when you get somebody whose visual literacy is super-sharp, the things that they say can be astounding and give credence to Male’s claims. Photographers who have wrestled with their process in order to express what they want to have a clear advantage in relating to the process of others at a glance.

Stephen Male, in common with many art directors, doesn't make pictures and so can we imply by this rationale, that his claim is an idle one – I don't think so. Visual, or more precisely photographic, literacy is not an exclusive club for photographers. A number of years ago Conrad and I took a party of students to see Karen DSilva at Photonica in New York. Karen told us that one of the most successful art directors on her books at the time started as an intern with no photographic experience at all, but she had an immediate instinctual ability to relate to photographs. This is a skill that can be learned in a rational way through exposure to imagery and constant analysis, even if the final quantum jump to being genuinely moved by a photographic image is nearly as rare as being able to create an inspirational photograph in the first place. Understanding the grammar of photography is, I think, a prerequisite for both critical or commercial success and ultimately it is the long suffering refinement of process that makes for visual distinction regardless of context.

Post-Structuralists might have us believe that no consensus is possible as to photographic grammar if we are seeking meaning within the picture – but I’m not sure this is entirely true, at least within the discourse of photography as I know it. Taste certainly comes into play at some point, but there seems to be a good deal of common ground – if you have been embedded in the world of photography for some time like the people that I’m referring to.

At this point I should talk about context, or rather discourse, if only in order to satisfy my post-modern training. Male’s claim, one might assume, applies to commercial conduits as well as less restrictive arenas like artists books. But of course he’s talking about discerning particular factors in imagery that probably doesn't accord to a broad-brush fashion or advertising ‘studium’. He would be looking at photographer’s personal work in making these remarks. Even so Male would perhaps claim that imagery produced by good photographers for commercial contexts still bear the scars, however faded, of the photographers process, and therefore their authorship.

And yet the mannered and demanding nature of lifestyle culture is not often amenable to critical/thoughtful photography. Scott King, another art director and speaker that I’ve hosted and interviewed many times, speaks of his running battle with commodity culture as the former creative director of Sleazenation and his constant difficulty with commercial clients ever since. King’s militancy appears at odds with market forces and contexts, whereas Stephen Male’s is not, essentially because Male cares more for the photographic image and it’s maker than King, and this gives him the latitude to invest into author as brand, in the manner of brand managers like Beth Taubner, writers like Adam Arviddson or photographers agents like Olivia Gideon-Thomson who tells us ‘Instead of thinking “people” think “brands”.

On the subject of the voice of the photographic author being heard above the noise of the lifestyle context, my mind goes back to a speaker that we had a long time back at Bournemouth, the much loved Emma Reeves, then picture editor at *Another Magazine* **(SLIDE)**. She started her 2 hour, hundred miles an hour talk by suggesting to students that they ‘have a look at magazine contexts you like and see if you can make work that fits into that style’. By the end of the lecture however she said, ‘you know what I said about making work to suit the magazine, well forget it, make the work first and then find the context.

Her final credo makes perfect sense, especially in a crowded marketplace, but then again being savvy as to visual language, or being literate in the contexts you wish to pursue is very valuable. Very occasionally the exotic fruit of ignorance makes an impact in the marketplace, where somebody with no knowledge of a particular discourse strikes gold or brings in something that is compatible – like Simen Johan **(SLIDE)** for example, whose curious surreal tableau saw him working for Diesel very soon after his degree show and subsequently represented by Bill Charles. When we visited Simen in his studio some time ago it was patently obvious that he had little or no knowledge of or interest in commercial photography – but this hasn’t stopped him from forging a successful career. We must stress however that he is the exception rather than the rule and that he clearly has a strong visual sensibility.

The picture I’m painting here is one in which there is a significant crossover between a photographers personal work (or let us say the work they care about for a reason other than money) and their commercial output. It’s a nice myth, and very occasionally it happens, but in most cases what a client, or an art buyer want, even a well informed and discerning one, is the veneer of the artist. Therefore as Olivia Gideon-Thomson, Managing agent of We Folk **(SLIDE)**, has recently said to my students, there is virtually no relationship between a photographers personal projects and their commercial work. Only process and craft can remain as common denominators. Her attitude to the education of photographers is grounded in savvy. She wants trainee photographers to be versed in commercial as well as artistic visual discourse, so that they are not too far removed from what she regards as real-world values. To be in control of your brand is the Holy Grail and for Olivia that means gaining as much knowledge as you can in lucrative arenas.

The notion of branding, or learning how to get your visual voice to be heard is a factor that appears to polarise opinion, not only among educators, but among industry professionals. Some are in favour of carving out a recognisable visual signature as the rational outcome of photographic training, others favour a more inspirational looser approach to photography education. **(SLIDE)** Marco Santucci for example, another esteemed photographers agent, in a panel discussion last year, said that he saw no point in an overtly commercial photography degree, and that higher education should be an exercise in indulging obsessions, so that the result is an amplification of difference, rather than a pursuit of a common commercial language. Conflictingly Mark George **(SLIDE)** has not changed his mantra in the 10 years I’ve known him, and that is that as a photographer you need to be renown for a specific style in order to be remembered by somebody with the power to commission commercial work.

**(SLIDE)** Solve Sundsbo, the renown fashion photographer and former protégé of Nick Knight, rejected this idea out of hand when he came to Bournemouth a few years ago, claiming that he had made a virtue of not being pinned down to a specific style and that if you accept a pigeonhole, you cease to be creative and might as well do something else for a living. But people’s definition of what is creative is radically different.

**(SLIDE)** For Matthew Donaldson, the craft of making a competent studio still-life, even when it is a product shot, is endlessly fascinating and challenging. For others, even in a similar field – like Chris Brooks **(SLIDE)**, this kind of process seems some way from the images that appear as personal work on his website.

**(SLIDE)** Last year we had Thom Atkinson come to talk to students about the way he approaches his brand – interestingly he made a distinction between ‘personal work’ that is made for the portfolio in the service of the brand, and art photography – the latter being that which is made for reasons other than money and tends to take more time. He says

‘Personal work (and art work if appropriate) is very important to a commercial career. This is the work that defines you and gives you a signature. You are entirely in control of this work and can use it to direct and evolve your career unrestrainedly to mark you out from other photographers. Commercial commissions are given in response to your personal work.’

Thom’s agent, Jacqueline Moore, has encouraged this tripartite system, in an effort to create an obvious synergy between what her photographer’s do personally and how they work commercially. ‘Sometimes’ she says ‘it is an atmosphere, the sense of a mood and space within personal work that can attract art directors to a particular photographer rather than a literal interpretation of the work.’

Thom’s massive experience in assisting has been invaluable to him in shaping his ability to translate his outlook to different contexts and to the speed of commercial work. This represents a very real practical issue in the communication of a visual authorial brand in commercial circumstances if we are encouraging our students to take their time over self-directed projects - the time pressure of deadlines. I’ve witnessed student photographers completely abandon any vestige of their usual process when faced with a live brief and a short deadline. Not only does their equipment often change, but their process, that has developed over weeks, months and years, seems inappropriate to a fast turn-around. The effect of speed is something that Male is very aware of and indeed tried to conquer in print media. When he was asked by BIG magazine to guest edit an issue he asked them if he could take an issue a year in advance, so that he could commission photographers to make slow work. After initially agreeing, they withdrew their offer.

With the best will in the world the difference between fast and slow photography is significant – it is the difference between active problem solving and reflective probing. If you start in the latter camp, the former can strike you as a foreign language and vice versa. Students who have been schooled to be reflective and slow can find it very difficult to operate in commercial environments and the only sure way is to learn through the experience of assisting on commercial shoots. My contention however, which was shared by Harry Hardie and Clare Hewitt on a panel discussion at Trumans recently, would still be that in order to learn a grammar of photography that transcends contexts, slow photography and maximum visual vocabulary is necessary at HE level. As Olivia Gideon Thomson said in an interview with a former Bournemouth student

‘Don't let ambition get in the way and don't be in a hurry; it takes time to be really good.’

In other words you can’t force a lasting visual signature, you can only inform yourself and gain experience. A shortcut gimmick, even if it is successful, will not last long enough to sustain a substantial career in photography, but a firm grasp of the grammar of photography gained through the long game of rigorous process is an enduring asset.