

## ***Which of us photographs?***

How will future historians interpret how the 2020/2021 lockdowns impacted photographic aesthetics? Such a study would likely be done best by scholars who are not yet even born. Practitioners and scholars of today are too close to the moment to be able to see clearly.

Central to the research questions maybe the curiosities of:

*What did they photograph?*

*How did they photograph?*

*Why did they photograph?*

Aesthetics is more than just the look of a thing. It is the overarching emphasis of how a look of a thing encompasses the existence and values of the thing.

When we look back on our 18-month back catalogue of images, we may think we know, does not mean we know all. That will only come with a much broader spectrum of reference, patterns over time, shifts in emphasis, and observing the forming of new visual languages.

It is not only global pandemics that can cause shifts in visual language, some of us have witnessed others in our own lifetimes. Kodak's 1888 box camera, the birth of 35mm, the advent of digital, the proliferation of the camera phone, the influence of Instagram, all these things and more have altered the global aesthetic of photography in different spheres of practice and consumption.

*When did they photograph?*

*Which of them photographed?*

These are not just questions for the professional realms of the commercial or art photographers, but also for vast majority of the population who would never call themselves photographers, the demographic known as 'everyday ordinary people'.

Yes, them.

In our professional and academic photography bubbles, we often forget – *we do not own photography, and not all comments about the state of photography are about us.*

My mum was a nurse and would never have considered herself to be a creative of any description, yet during my childhood she enthusiastically owned a series of different

camera models, and was the photographer of our lives. Two opposing facts exist at the same time – no, she was not a photographer / yes, she was a photographer. Alternatively, my dad was a painter – spraying dark green tones onto army vehicle parts, in an MOD contracted factory for all the 46 years that I knew him. I don't recall him ever taking a photograph in all the 79 years of his life.



'Number 79 - Rabbit?' - Shawn Sobers, July 2021

In homage to my dad at this thought, I find the 79<sup>th</sup> photograph in my mobile phone camera reel and paste it into this article. I'm reminded of the conversation I had with my daughter when I sent her the picture immediately afterwards. I asked her whether her belt was left on the floor deliberately to look like a rabbit. Her reply was full of laughing emojis with the words "*no it wasn't!!!!*", followed by more laughing emojis. This is a random fond memory of a father/daughter conversation which is now fused with nostalgic memories of my dad, generating an emotional intergenerational moment in my thoughts that I hadn't anticipated. All from taking an absurd photograph 11 days ago. I'm glad I did.

*Which of us photographs?*

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*What do we photograph?*

*How do we photograph?*

*Why do we photograph?*

*When do we photograph?*

I ask myself these questions not only when I am looking around a tutorial seminar room of my students, or at a conference of photographers or visual anthropologists, but also when I am at a tourist attraction, a social occasion, at a supermarket checkout, waiting for food in a café....

Photography will have touched all these people's lives...

*...how, when, where...?*

All of the photographers in this publication are worthy of future study by not-born-yet historians. A cohort of post-graduates choosing photography as their interpretive tool through which to visualise their ideas. Midway through their peculiar specialist practice, the world shifted under their feet. They had to make fundamental choices about *what they shot, how they shot, where they shot, where they lived, what they ate, how they survived, how they kept their loved ones safe...*

Yes, core questions about photography can feel trivial when faced with such life important circumstances, yet such circumstances will also affect what they photograph, and how...the aesthetics. The key takeaway however is that they continued to photograph. Regardless of what it was. That is the thing. To evoke Marshall McLuhan - *the medium is the message* of our times. I (idealistically) argue that their motivation was not only for their academic grade, but because of the fact that they *are* photographers. That is what they do.

A few years ago I came up with a tv comedy sketch, which I shall give away here free.

Synopsis: A mother gets increasingly worried about the behaviour of her teenage daughter, and takes her to the GP.

Mother:

*She hardly sleeps. She spends all her money. Hangs around with weird people. She has an obsession with rubbish. She stares at shadows. She collects junk. She even stops in the street to*

*stare at broken windows and dead pigeons. Worst of all, I don't understand a word she says.*

The GP takes the girl's blood pressure, a sample of blood and urine for tests, looks into the back of her throat and into her eyes, and takes a stethoscope and listens to her heart.

GP:

*Well, we'll send the samples off for some tests, but looking at the signs I'm pretty sure I know what it is. Mrs Smith, your daughter, is a photographer.*

The Mother cries uncontrollably, sobbing to her daughter that they'll get a second opinion, and get her all the help she can. The girl herself hasn't heard a word of any of it, listening to a Susan Sontag audio book through her AirPods.

To be a photographer, you have to have a slightly obsessed personality. To want to make a physical record of a slice of life for future reference, is not normal for everybody. Why can't we just let those moments go? Whether it be a social gathering, a war zone, a marriage, street observation, fashion show, birthday party, or otherwise, we are not content to just live in the moment – that moment is coming back with us, whether it was expecting to or not.

*Which of us photographs?* The curious. The ones who notice the miniscule and seemingly insignificant shifts in everyday life, (not only the epic social and global shifts), and thinks to themselves, *'I'll grab that, someone someday might find it interesting, even if it's only me.'*

Dr Shawn Sobers  
Associate Professor - Cultural Interdisciplinary Practice  
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