

On Teaching Photography: Mark Jenkinson



My teaching philosophy is a little out of the norm so I would like to clarify my approach. I really don't consider myself a "teacher" in the classic sense of the word. I like to compare my approach to that of a "player/coach". Player/coaches are people who have been participants at a high level; the ex-prima ballerina who has become a dance instructor, the retired NBA player who can occasionally embarrass a 20-year-old NCAA player in a pick-up game. Player/coaches know theory, but they play based on the situation.

The job of a teacher is to "teach", to impart knowledge. The job of a coach is to facilitate and guide the aspirations and intentions of another. Our students come to us with highly individualized dreams for their future, the dream might be a little fuzzy, or it might be based on an outmoded view of the field, but it is *their* dream. It is unique. My mission is to assist them in actualizing those dreams, and then convince them to dream a little bigger, and dig a little deeper.

My feeling is that when a traditional teacher "teaches" something to a student, then the student credits the teacher for being brilliant. However, if a teacher can skillfully lead a student to his or her unique epiphany, the student rightly credits themselves with the insight, and it empowers the student for the rest of their life.

I have always felt that photography - as commonly practiced- is closer to the performing arts or athletics than it is to traditional plastic arts or literature. As photographers, we don't have the luxury of the painter or writer's leisurely reflection, in fact we don't even have the performer's benefit of rehearsals. We are rooted in the physical world; our poetry is born in communion with physics, time, and technology. Our "pictures look like where we are", to paraphrase Garry Winogrand. As photographers, we strive to *be there* with the fullness of our being. We are emotional and intellectual beings performing and participating at the highest state of our consciousness within the fluid moment of our creation. I take issue with the popular idea of the photographer as a storyteller. It belittles both photography and literature. Our photographs aren't "observations" or "stories"; they are the records/trophies of a transcendent and participatory connection to the world. Whatever stories a photograph might tell are borne in the mind of the viewer. The power of the photograph lies in both the veracity of its description, and the ambiguity of its interpretation.

Do coaches also teach? Of course they do. I can teach a student how to use a complex program or piece of equipment. I can explain the physics of why depth of field works or the historical precedents for three-point lighting. But these practicalities are easily learned in books and YouTube tutorials. If this were my purpose, then I could be easily replaced by a subscription to Lynda.com.

In this regard, my challenge is not to “teach” my students how to light an object according to some common formula, it is for me to help them explore the language and history of light, and to realize that the idiosyncrasy of their vision is a unique and unprecedented event in the history of the universe.

For me, the photographic act is a sacrament, meant in every sense of the word. But photography is also a language. Photographs may, or may not, be stories, but they are a mode of communication and expression. Communication requires a shared history and/or language. I might not understand the literal content of an Italian opera singer, yet I can understand elements of her expression due to a shared history of western music. After all, opera’s most profound expression is carried by the voice, not the lyrics.

By the same token photography employs certain historically accepted conventions to communicate effectively. Sometimes these become cliché, sometimes we must invent new forms to communicate original ideas. Part of any instructor’s job is to teach the shared iconography of the medium while being open to the challenges presented by new and unfamiliar forms of expression by emerging artists with original ideas.

My professional photography career has formed me in many ways. I’ve served as the director of photography on a few short films, done high level advertising shoots for companies like Rolex, Ford, and Yamaha, and perhaps most importantly, produced thousands of stories for magazines like Fortune, Vanity Fair, Vogue and many others. I can say with confidence that I have never encountered a problem I couldn’t solve. The hard lesson of being a professional means that you can never afford to fail. I can work with any camera from a Red Dragon digital cinema camera to an 8 X 10 Deardorff, this practical expertise is brought to the classroom every day.

My parallel career as a writer has always been an integral part of my teaching practice, but it might be worth noting that I have no professional training as a writer (in case you hadn’t noticed). I learned to write by writing for popular magazines under the tutelage of some very encouraging and understanding editors. It might seem strange to relate my career as an adventure journalist/motorcycle test editor to the academic world, but it has helped forge my teaching/writing style

Especially in my motorcycle reviews I often had to explain (as succinctly as possible) the difference between –for example- a two- stroke single cylinder engine and four-stroke twin. However, because I always wrote for general interest magazines (Men’s Journal, GQ, etc), I was never allowed to employ specialized jargon or technical terms. This a rule I also bring to my classroom. I always try to speak to the highest common denominator (that is still *common*). While it is important for students to learn the vocabulary of art criticism, I try to leave that to the critical studies professors in my department. Too often art-speak jargon is employed to impress students with the instructor’s intelligence. Profound ideas can be communicated in simple language and the result is communication with a vastly larger audience. I always cringe a little when I hear someone use terms like “punctum” or “non-indexical imagery” in a

studio classroom. Speaking plainly works. My favorite writer on photography was John Szarkowski who could write 300 simple words that would shake my world. As my editors used to say, “Brevity has power”.

As the internship supervisor for DPI, I always ask one question first, “What do you want to do with your life?”. The answer invariably changes over the years so it’s important to ask the question often. In my book, **“Careers in Photography, Finding your True Path”** I tried to examine the many different post graduate options there are for photography majors, photo editing, gallerist, art buyer, photographer representative, and of course, professional photographer. When I first took over the internship program over 25 years ago I could draw upon my personal professional contacts. It is gratifying to now draw upon our alumni to serve as mentors to our current students.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of being a teacher/practitioner is the relationship I’ve had with students who became my assistants later. In some cases, these are relationships that go back decades, and many of my ex-assistants have been far more successful than I could ever have imagined. Their successes owe nothing to me. A coach can’t take credit for the physical performance of an athlete, but he can applaud their achievement from the sidelines.

It’s been a delightful challenge to adapt my teaching to the changing technology of imaging. I started my teaching career in 1984 as one of the “New Wave” of color photographers, a position that seems quaint in the current landscape. Since then, I have authored eight original curricula within the department that deal with subjects as diverse as lighting, fashion, business, multimedia, and color theory. I’ve witnessed the seismic shift in my medium from analog to digital. Last year I made the step into immersive 360 VR filmmaking and AR (augmented reality). It’s a struggle to keep up with the pace, but it’s been so much fun.

Over the past 40 years, in addition to my professional work, I’ve produced about 7 major bodies of photographic work on a variety of subjects; Capital Punishment, Las Vegas, modern architecture, fatherhood, etc. My current academic research has taken a turn away from my career as a practitioner (though I continue to make photographs daily) and into academia.

I’ve had a long interest in theoretical physics that stretches back over 40 years. Simply put: What is the fabric of the physical universe? It’s not an original question; but the one consistent conclusion in several millennia of investigation by the greatest minds in history, from Plato to Hawking, always brings it back to one thing: The mysteries of the universe are hidden in the nature and behavior of light. Within the lexicon of physics, the photon is defined as a “messenger particle”; its job is to tell us “something” about something else.

As a photographer light and optics are my tools, utilities that I use to express emotion, to educate, to investigate, and sometimes lie. But light is also the only commonly accepted yardstick of the universe; literally the constant, “c”.

The history of light is the history of thought, science, technology and art; all our notions of space, time, and reality are derived from lens-based experimentation and investigations into light. The invention of photography is itself, is a direct outgrowth of history's earliest scientists, the "Natural Philosophers". Science literally began with a camera, as Ibn Al-Haytham observed the world projected inverted on the wall of his prison cell.

I'm not a scientist but I am particularly fascinated by how theories of reality that are grounded in scientific research have a way of infiltrating and influencing art and culture: perspective, impressionism, Dutch painting, cubism, conceptual art, all have their roots in optics and theoretical physics. The current deus ex machina of popular cinema –parallel universe theory- was born from an obscure PhD. thesis written in 1954 by Hugh Everett at Princeton. The implications were so shocking that he didn't believe it himself. It was simply an interesting mathematical interpretation of a classic experiment on wave/particle duality. Though not experimentally proven, it has become one of the prevailing interpretations of reality among the world's physicists.

The next question everyone asks is, "Will I write a book?". I've started in baby steps, but it's a bigger subject than anything I've ever attempted. Relating 5000 years of optical theory to 5000 years of art history is probably beyond my modest abilities, but writing is a tool I use to help to make the ideas and relationships concrete.

How does this relate back to teaching? Well, I do engage my students in my experimental shenanigans on occasion. I recently reverse-engineered Vermeer's painting device (a combination of camera obscura and spherical mirrors based on the Newtonian telescope) in a class with my freshman, and my lighting students were treated to a demonstration of Schlieren photography (a method of using air as a lens to examine the shock waves of fast-moving objects). I do a couple of PowerPoint lectures on the subject. For every 5 students who think it's all beside the point there are always a few who are fascinated.

I've always said that my career as a photographer has been a privilege, there are few professions that challenge one to be a better version of yourself with each new day. Of course, the same is true for teachers, so perhaps I am doubly blessed.

MRJ