

It strikes me that this is the first time I'll have written about education without an ulterior motive, that's to say, either in furtherance of my own academic ends, or else as explanation or exhortation to students and even colleagues, certain of whom aren't exactly habituated to theoretical thought. So, I'm inclined just to write, and see what will evolve.

Although photography is a strange beast in the way it works, this strangeness is masked by its apparent transparency, and although a full education in and through photography may be as subtle and complex as any other form of education, the commonest perception of the medium is that you need only the most concrete training to become a fully competent practitioner.

Indeed, this is true enough, provided that the traditional premises of photographic professionalism are accepted. If by and large the photographer has always accepted the place of journeyman, it is because of the mechanical nature of the medium. Apparatus and materials nowadays tend to give closely predictable results, so replacing intuitive craftsmanship with a crude, technicist determinism that effectively amounts to deskilling. Provided we're thinking of ordinary levels of general photography, excluding specialist aspects which may demand extensive knowledge of physics and chemistry, it is possible to train an operative to acquire a basic set of skills in a remarkably short time. I guess this is an area susceptible to very blunt teaching implements, such as programmed learning, or any other devices of crude behaviourism.

To the Thatcherite, trying hard to produce a compliant and (I wonder why?) immobile labour force, such an end for the educational process is a conclusion devoutly to be wished. So far as I'm concerned, a similar level of skill, but seen as less than finite, and more subtle than a bag of building blocks, is a necessary and welcome stage in any genuine education (as distinct from training) in photography.

The premise underlying this more sophisticated educational experience is that photography is a fully articulable medium of communication. I would go so far as to say that photography qualifies, albeit in a special sense, for consideration as a language. However, many authorities disagree with me, and the arguments are yet to be opposed in public. Even if what might be called my strong view of photography doesn't prevail, the softer concept of the medium is still elaborate and powerful enough to show the journeyman photographer standing in relation to his medium much as the scribe stood in relation to literature; an unsatisfactory situation for anyone with the mind to communicate in accordance with their own desires and conscience, and not merely to act as agent in another's transaction.

I hope I don't oversimplify too far when I say that I see photographic education as spinning out two threads in addition to the technical line. The first deals with the social and cultural position of the medium, attending specially to the interactions of photography with the plastic arts, literature and even music. One has to notice that, unlike painting, which is bound into a certain context by the fact of its existence, photography is inherently context free, and is located (and transformed) strictly in accordance with the situation in which it's perceived.

This requires the second thread, which leads from the basic ability to visualise images at all, through the photographer's expression of a personal view, to the ability to communicate with others by means of imagery and context generated as a coherent unit.

The first thread picks up on technical determinants mostly in a historical sense, and would consider questions of process as response to, and influence on aesthetic criteria in work already produced. In the second thread, of conception and communication, historical understanding and immediate experience interact with a technical discipline which comprehends the infinite variability of process, and the means by which this knowledge may be employed to generate meaning. I believe that one of the uniquenesses of photography is in the intimate bond between the artistic/experiential applications of image making with precise, technological applications of physics and chemistry. Success demands a fine balance between these aspects. Tip to one side, and drift away into entropic indulgence. On the other lies the arid technicism of the amateur and ordinary commercial worlds.

So the integration of all these intellectual and craft activities is an intense and demanding business, and students who attend to it thoroughly ought, it seems to me, to be able to move out and operate over a wide range of media activities, or indeed within any area dependent upon articulate cultural awareness. This seems to be becoming the case, although a large proportion of students do retain a direct connection with photography. It's gratifying to note that the range of work at Trent embraces just about everything from fashion and advertising to fine art photography, or the various forms of documentation.

I suppose, if the lower levels of education provide Thatcherite cannon-fodder, we might expect to be equated with the Liberal/SDP Alliance and points left. But while it does of course gratify me to think that I might contribute something towards people's acquisition of a useful and more or less liberal profession, the really deep reward comes when I feel that I've helped in the growth of a personal autonomy, based on an unsatisfied mind, and above all, a sense of curiosity and wonder at the world. This is not the most comfortable of states to exist in, nor is it one to please politicians of any colour - which latter is surely in itself a pleasure to the rest of us!

The nicest thing anyone's said about my teaching, was when a student thanked me for helping her to have three completely class-free years.

All these remarks beg the question as to what, generally, education should be about, and the answers in common circulation seem to polarise between notions that education is the process by which the young are initiated into the established values of society, or else that it is the means by which necessary social changes are understood and brought about. I'm always surprised, though by now I shouldn't be, to find these views treated as a binary opposition, with whichever is the opposing pole vehemently rejected.

When I was a student of education, R.S. Peters provided the dominant, official voice of our curriculum, and as you might expect, he's an initiation man. If you want a more detailed critique of that view, try 'The Philosophy of Education, or the Wisdom and Wit of R.S. Peters', by David Adelstein, in Counter Course, Trevor Pateman (ed.), Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 115, ff. Or of course, Illich in a number of his manifestations, but especially Deschooling Society.

There is good reason, I think, to consider these views inclusively, certainly seeing them opposed, but across the diameter of a circle, with the educted members of society moving around its circumference, instead of irrevocably clustered about either end of an axis. My remaining reservation is a nagging doubt about the word 'initiation', for deep down it has a flavour for me of acquiescence with what is revealed, suggesting complicity or incorporation more than it does impartial revelation. Maybe 'revelation' would be a good word not to bear this load. Maybe also, I split hairs.