8

Vernacular photographic genres after the camera phone

Peter Buse

I

What is the place of photography in a book on genre? Genre theory, as Garin Dowd notes, has played a 'minor role…in the areas of the musical, visual, and plastic arts', with the most fertile ground found in literary studies. (Dowd, 2006, p.21) In genre studies, visual culture is nonetheless prominent, but mainly in its narrative-based forms, such as cinema and television. John Frow, in his introduction to genre, cites as relevant the following visual or plastic arts: drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, film, television, opera, drama; but does not mention photography. (Frow, 2006, p.1) In photography studies meanwhile, genre is neither a key category of analysis nor subject to extensive theorisation. Photography critics usually call their object a *medium* or consider it primarily a *technology* with specific properties, a distinction behind which many controversies rage. In the key volume *Photography Theory*, for example, central figures in photography studies lock horns and come to a stalemate over issues such as 'medium specificity' and photography's 'indexicality'. (Elkins, 2007, pp.183-96 and pp.256-69) Nowhere in this dispute does genre raise its head.

The parameters for this exclusion of generic questions were perhaps set in 1961 when Roland Barthes characterized photography as '*a message without a code*', 'a mechanical analogue of reality' (Barthes, 1977, pp.17-8). If genre suggests conventions and formal patterning, where is there room for it here, in a 'codeless' medium or technology that provides a direct 'analogon' of the real? (Barthes, 1977, p.17) Almost twenty years later, in *Camera Lucida*,

Barthes echoed this claim, asserting that 'the Photograph…is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid'. (Barthes, 1984, p.4) To put it another way, Barthes locates individual photographs at the pole of absolute singularity, at the greatest distance possible from the 'general' of genre.

And yet, at the same time, photography is constantly subject to categorisations and classifications: architectural, documentary, landscape, portrait, snapshot, still life, and war photography are just some of the recognisable sub-fields that organise knowledge of photography and shape how photographic images are consumed. Even without theorisation, such divisions of the field rely implicitly on a sort of generic thinking. In addition, at least some of these photographic kinds – architectural, landscape, portrait, still life – inherit their names directly from established genres in painting. As Naomi Rosenblum usefully explains, architecture and landscape, although low in the hierarchies of genre in the 19th century, were among the most popular subjects of early photography. One reason for this was that buildings and mountains did not move, and were outdoors, making them ideal subjects for slow film requiring long exposures and large amounts of light (Rosenblum, 1997, p.95).

The technological determinants of these early photographic 'genres' remind us that many forms of photography – macrography, astrophotography, ultraviolet photography – would be very difficult to characterize as genres, and are much better described as technical processes. It is in fact an open question whether landscape, for instance, is a photographic genre, or simply a mode in which photography participates. A failure, or inability to decide should not trouble us too much though, for as Frow puts it,

in dealing with questions of genre, our concern should not be with matters of taxonomic substance ('What classes and sub-classes are there? To which class does this text belong') – to which there are never any 'correct' answers – but rather with questions of use: 'What models of classification are there, and how have people made use of them in particular circumstances?' (Frow, 2006, p.55)

Even if genre studies has not made much headway with photography, photography itself has been subject to considerable taxonomic attention, and the causes and consequences of those taxonomies deserve scrutiny, particularly since they are invariably accompanied by hierarchies. In what amounts to a manifesto for genre studies, David Duff calls for a close examination of such hierarchies and asks the critic to identify dominant genres and 'to explain how they attained that position of dominance…. and how the cultural assumptions and aspirations of an era are reflected in the hierarchy of genres'. (Duff, 2000, p.19) His call refers in the first instance to literary hierarchies, but is also applicable to photography, a field in which value is distributed unevenly across different modes, genres, types (or what you will). A case in point is vernacular photography, at once denigrated and lionised in its complex position at the intersection of aesthetics, technology and social distinction.

Vernacular photography accounts for the greatest proportion of the world's image-making. While it is sometimes described as a genre, it might be better understood as a social practice which partakes of many photographic modes. It is highly dependent on and responsive to technological change, since so many (although not all) of its practitioners rely on equipment that requires little skill and the exact workings of which they do not need to understand. Vernacular photographs are usually made by amateurs whose intentions in the first instance are not aesthetic, commercial, or scientific. It is often assumed that the main form of

vernacular photography, the snapshot, is a spontaneous product of an untutored eye, and that any obedience it shows to rules of composition is the result of chance rather than deliberation. For this reason it is scorned by some, and for the same reason embraced by art photographers alert to its 'primitive' charms. Even so, the prevalence in snapshot history of pets, mothers and children, birthday parties, sunsets, and proud owners in front of new cars suggests that amateur photographers are well trained in the sorts of pictures they are supposed to take, even if they have not learnt them formally. At the same time, from the beginnings of snapshot photography, keen amateurs have relied on guidebooks and photographic periodicals which advised them in detail on the conventions of composition, lighting, exposure, as well as offering guidance on typical subject matter, much of which falls neatly into recognisable genres of wider visual cultures.

Recent developments in photographic technologies have made snapshot cameras smaller, lighter, and incorporated them into a range of other devices, most often phones. These changes have contributed to the ubiquity of vernacular photography in consumer cultures (see Hand, 2012). In addition, digital technologies allow amateur photographers an unprecedented array of filtering tools (Hipstamatic, Instagram, and so on) and modes of circulation (photo-sharing social networks, from Facebook to Flickr to Instagram). Apart from a rump of enthusiasts, chemical film has been all but abandoned, the framed photo has been superseded by the screen-based image, and the volume of pictures taken has reached unprecedented levels. But have these changes also led to changes in vernacular photographic practices, changes to the subject matter and 'genres' in which amateurs shoot? Has the tagging and labelling enabled by social networking software led to a proliferation, even explosion, of categories, or are the traditional subjects (pets, sunsets, new cars) of vernacular photography still alive and well?

If volume and intensity of commentary are the yardsticks, then the most significant new photographic sub-genre in the era of the networked image is of course the 'selfie'. Responding to widely circulated celebrity images (de Generes, Kardashian) and political gaffes (Obama, Cameron), the OED chose it as word of the year in 2013. Photographic portraits are nothing new: the vogue for them in the nineteenth century prompted Baudelaire to lament the very discovery of photography: 'From that moment onwards, our loathsome society rushed, like Narcissus, to contemplate its trivial image on a metallic plate. A form of lunacy, an extraordinary fanaticism took hold of these new sun-worshippers.' (Baudelaire, 1980, pp.86-7) Metallic plates were not as handy as smart phones, and the professional studio photographer held a monopoly on the form until automatic timers and shutter release cables placed photographic portraiture in the hands of any amateur who was willing to take up these tools. Similarly, the selfie had to wait for very specific technological advances before it could give expression to a pre-existing drive for self-fashioning. While the photograph taken into a mirror predates the camera phone, the arm's length self-portrait or group portrait is new, encouraged by two developments in photographic technology: the preview screen, which began to appear in amateur digital cameras at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the double-lensed device, one lens pointing in the same direction as the preview screen. These features allow the untrained portrait-taker to treat the preview screen as if it were a mirror, and so judge pose and expression, and also ensure the image is correctly focused.

According to media theorists who seek to define this sub-genre of portraiture, the arm's length exposure alone does not constitute a selfie: the image only becomes a selfie once it has been tagged as such (#selfie), and has been shared through networked platforms. As a generic product, then, it is technologically determined in more than one way: not just by the

contents of the image, which are made possible by the preview screen and smartphone camera, but by the online apparatus, the computational media, into which the image is inserted. The selfie is defined by the uses to which it is put: it is not just a self-portrait, but a self-portrait taken to be posted online. (Tifentale, 2014, p.11) This exhibitionist dimension of the selfie generates a corresponding discourse condemning their makers as 'self-obsessed attention-seekers in constant need of validation', but Julian Stallabrass, for one, warns against this reproach. He claims that selfie-takers show 'considerable sophistication in the making of images and skepticism about their effects. The artifice of commercial imagery is understood through practical emulation. Most selfies are pastiche and many tip into parody'. ('SelfieCity', 2014; Stallabrass, 2014, p.20) In other words, we should take selfies seriously as a new sub-genre of portraiture: not only do they have a complex intertextual relation to the existing visual field, but often display self-reflexivity about their own codes.

It is easy enough to comment on the selfie in the abstract, but another matter when it comes to assessing it in its multiple empirical manifestations. The study of amateur photography has always faced the daunting problem of what is now called 'big data'. In 1939 photo-historian Lucia Moholy was already estimating that somewhere in the region of 160 million amateur snapshots were taken every year in Britain alone. Later scholars cited the 'billions' of amateur snaps taken each year, the 'colossal' number and 'ceaseless tide' of photos, and the 'avalanche' of family albums. (Chalfen, 1987, p.13; Collins, 1990, p.311; Crawley, 1989, p.153; Langford, 2001, p.78) In the digital era, if anything, the tide has increased at such an exponential rate that it is not clear where one would begin. For some, the image world has now become 'an unmanageable and unimaginable excess.' (Lister, 2013, p.9) In spite of this excess, the selfie has already been the subject of a major data gathering exercise, 'Selfiecity.net', which brings together a team of cultural theorists and computer scientists to

examine the selfie trend in five major cities: Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York and Sao Paolo. Using algorithms and automated facial analysis software, the project was able to make some general observations about a very large data set of images posted to Instagram. Among the findings were the following: more women than men take selfies; only 4% of photos posted on Instagram can be classified as selfies; in Moscow selfie-takers smile the least and in Bangkok the most; and selfies in Sao Paolo have the greatest average head tilt. ('Selfiecity'b)

The project is accompanied by a critical apparatus that considers the social and cultural milieu of the newly networked image, but on the face of it, these findings are banal, even superficial. The image analysis software can drill down into the big data and detect recurrent patterns that a human observer might suspect, but could not quantify with any reasonable certainty. However, there is a huge gap between purely descriptive pattern recognition and the kinds of aesthetic judgments that inform Stallabrass' assessment of the selfie, an assessment that in turn is not backed up by any real empirical evidence. How are we to join up the bland raw data with the bigger claims made by Stallabrass, claims which are compelling, but which rest on unstable ground ('Most selfies are pastiche' he says, 'and many tip into parody', but he neither quantifies 'most' nor proves the 'many')? One starting point would be to consider the selfie, not in isolation as a singular sub-genre with certain recurring features, but as one iteration of amateur photographic practice that stretches back well before the digital era, and which is marked, as Bourdieu puts it, by its 'social definition.'

Bourdieu makes this claim in *Photography: A Middle Brow Art* (1965), a collectively written work that does not overtly foreground photographic genres, but which is nonetheless a rich source for any consideration of the classificatory constraints at work in popular amateur

photography. While Bourdieu and his co-writers concede that in theory anything is photographable and that there are no formal limits to what an amateur might choose for subject matter, in practice, they argue, 'a finite and well-defined range of subjects, genres, and compositions' are adopted by the amateur photographer. (Bourdieu, 1990, p.6) Bourdieu does not explain what, if any, distinctions he is making between 'subject', 'genre' and 'composition', but it is clear that he mobilises the term 'genre' for two main purposes. First, he wants to show that vernacular image-making is neither spontaneous nor random, but bound tightly by conventions. Secondly, amateur photography is socially stratified and subject to hierarchies, with photographic habits and choice of subject matter dictated by class position, but more importantly by a division between photographers who have aesthetic pretensions and those who do not, the former usually belonging to camera clubs, and characterised by what Bourdieu calls a 'fervent practice'. (Bourdieu, 1990, p.47) For shorthand, we can call them the snapshooter and the 'serious amateur'.

These two groups are equally dedicated to what Bourdieu calls the 'family function' of amateur photography. For the occasional photographer who is not a member of a camera club and for whom the workings of the camera and the darkroom are a mystery, picture-taking follows a familiar ritual pattern: weddings, babies, holidays, all recorded as affirmations of domestic intimacy, as part of the process of the integration of family bonds. (Bourdieu, pp.26-8) For this photographer, photography is reserved for special events, and the camera is rarely or never used to record the everyday. The other kind of amateurs, the devotees with darkroom skills, define their practice against this family function, and in fact do their utmost to 'liberate' photography from the family function, avoiding at all costs the favourite themes of domestic photography. (Bourdieu, p.62) Their practice may attempt, then, to break with the conventions of domestic genres, but even if they succeed in liberating

photography from the family, they remain firmly bound to the family function themselves, since their practice is only meaningful in relation to that which it negates.

Whether the subject matter is the workplace, landscapes, or still lifes in makeshift studios, the photography of the serious amateur is still socially defined in Bourdieu's sense, because it is making a bid for distinction. Serious amateurs need the casual family snap-shooter to validate their own 'skilled' practice through its very inferiority in a hierarchy of taste. But in Bourdieu's view, the distinction on offer from photography is paltry and second-rate, due to photography's own lowly position within the hierarchy of the representational arts. There is no institutional legitimation of photography, so 'unlike going to museums or concerts, it does not have the support of an authority with the explicit role of teaching or encouraging it', and 'attempts to apply artistic intentions to photography appear excessive because the models and norms required for this are missing'. (Bourdieu, pp.70 & 72) As a consequence, a devoted fanaticism for photography is actually taken to be a sign of a *lack* of distinction by those in possession of genuine cultural capital, the opera-goers, the collectors of modern art. It is for this reason that Bourdieu calls photography a 'middle brow art', or in the original French, 'un art moyen'.

Photography: A Middle Brow Art was written before the photo-boom of the 1970s when photography conquered the art galleries, growing sharply in monetary value and cultural capital, while at the same time gaining wider admission to the universities and art schools. But it is doubtful whether the serious amateur was swept along with professional and artist photographers in this ascension. Distinction remains elusive for those with a 'fervent practice', partly because of the continuing technological basis of that practice. One of the main markers of distinction between serious amateurs and their counterparts dedicated to the

family function, is a greater knowledge of the technical workings of the photographic apparatus. And as Bourdieu says, it is invariably experience in the darkroom developing one's own prints that evidences this greater knowledge. (Bourdieu, p.107) However, as soon as know-how takes on this special status, then it is as much mechanics and technical skill that are at stake as it is aesthetics. 'It might thus be part of the "essence" of photography' Bourdieu says, 'to oscillate between the imitation of painting and *an interest in technology*'. (Bourdieu, p.104)

II

This oscillation extends right back to the early days of photography, and constitutes a basic tension in a field whose proponents have always wavered between art and science. It can be seen in the specialist publications aimed at photographers from the nineteenth century onwards, professional and amateur alike. In Britain, there were three such publications to begin with: *The Photographic Journal* (1853), which published Royal Photographic Society news, *The British Journal of Photography* (1854), aimed at the professional photographer, and *Photographic News* (1858), for the amateur. The amateur was of course a different creature in the mid-nineteenth century, when a large income, plenty of leisure time, and knowledge of chemistry were prerequisites for the non-professional. Unsurprisingly perhaps, throughout the nineteenth century the editors of all three of these periodicals were chemists, and their pages were filled with illustrations of technical processes and advances, with extended discussion of such pressing matters as the permanence of photographic images. As photography became accessible to a wider range of amateurs, a key new entrant in this field was the weekly *Amateur Photographer* in 1884. It too was edited in the first instance by a chemist, but the editorship was assumed in 1895 by A. Horsley Hinton, a pictorialist, for whom aesthetic concerns, and with them ones of genre, took priority. Technical matters

remained a constant in the pages of the periodical, but from the arrival of Horsley Hinton, *Amateur Photographer* took on a role that it still maintains as a site of practical advice for amateur photographers on matters of style, subject matter and composition.

Popular photography magazines and journals are in fact a vital resource for anyone wanting to move beyond the undifferentiated mass of big data, which may lead us to treat photographic images in isolation, when in fact they are better understood in their textual and social settings. If we want to draw both qualitative and quantitative judgements, even a single issue of a magazine is valuable, because of the repetitive nature of the magazine format, which relies on recurring features that allow regular readers to navigate its pages easily, seeking out the sections or contributors they most enjoy. To read a single issue is also to get an insight into a magazine's contents over a longer duration: the format will of course evolve and change, but over any given extended timespan, will generally be relatively stable. The other advantage of magazines as sources is that they make visible the co-existence of historical continuity and discontinuity. Photographic technologies in 2014 may be radically different from those available in 1884 when *Amateur Photographer* was launched, and indeed photographic practices may have altered significantly as well, but the continued publication of the magazine shows that technological breaks are not absolute, but are integrated into existing practices, and adapt themselves to those practices.

To get a sense of the discourse at work in these magazines around the era that Bourdieu was writing, and selecting almost at random, we could cite the following appraisal of a new camera in the American magazine *Popular Photography* in 1973:

Although the SX-70 is a true SLR, it lacks certain features that could make it a fully

creative tool for some advanced amateurs and pros. The lack of any control over depth of

field, due to practically idiot-proof exposure automation, is one problem. This can be

particularly nettling in extra-close shooting, where depth of field is a major image-quality

determinant [….] The other is lack of control over shutter speed, an absolute 'must' when

trying to stop fast action. One would actually hope for a 'professional' Polaroid SLR in the

not-too-distant future. This is said with no malice intended. The Polaroid SX-70 appeals

to, and is eminently suited to, a mass market. And it is the ability to stay in business via

this mass market that eventually lets manufacturers give us 'enthusiasts' the specialty

merchandise we want. (Rothschild, 1973)

This striking assessment is almost a manifesto for the serious amateur of Bourdieu's book.

Critically, the writer Norman Rothschild places 'advanced amateurs' and 'pros' on a shared

continuum of 'enthusiasts' and separates them from the 'idiots' of the mass market against

which the SX-70 has been proofed. The reader of the magazine is most likely an advanced

amateur, but Rothschild holds out the possibility to that reader of a movement between

categories, suggesting that he aspires to produce photographs of a professional standard. At

the same time, Rothschild's summing up captures succinctly the technological basis on which

the serious amateur's identity rests. The writer twice uses the phrase 'lack of control' to

describe the full automation of the SX-70. Why does the advanced photographer want

'control' of exposure and shutter speed? In order to make the camera a 'fully creative tool.'

For *Popular Photography* then, *creativity* and *control* are the markers of distinction which

separate its kind of photography from the unskilled snapping enabled by the SX-70. The title

of the magazine may signal an ambition to democratize photography, but technological

advances that made photography even more popular were clearly considered a threat to the

identity of their core audience. The serious amateur's is a popular practice, then, but not too popular.

To evaluate what has changed in the field that Bourdieu described in 1965 as defined by the 'family function', and since this striking statement from 1973, I propose examining single issues of two magazines from the post-digital era. One of them, *Amateur Photographer*, existed already in the analogue era; the other, *Photography Monthly*, was founded at a time when digital cameras were becoming readily available to amateur photographers.[1] The issues in question are *Photography Monthly* 131 (February 2012) and *Amateur Photographer* of August 23 2014. Priced respectively at £3.99 and £2.95, they are differentiated from each other by frequency and size (at 114 and 82 pages) and from other key magazines by relative cost and quality of production. By comparison, the *British Journal of Photography* has a stiff cover, is printed on better paper, and is priced at £6.99, containing longer features on photographers of greater renown than the ones found in the pages of *Photography Monthly* and *Amateur Photographer*. Of these two magazines we can ask three questions: what do they reveal about the continuing social stratification of amateur photography; what hierarchies of subject matters or photographic genres does the advanced amateur subscribe to in the digital era; and to what extent is this practice dependent on a technological sub-structure?

[Figure 1 about here – cover, *Photography Monthly*]

The addressee of the two popular photography magazines is clearly the enthusiast, the camera club member, of Bourdieu's study, for whom photographic distinction lies in departures from the family function of domestic photography.   A less dedicated practice does not require

reference to specialist publications, and as Margaret Beetham argues, the periodical form itself is particularly suited to aspiration:

> Serial publications have to secure purchasers/readers who keep returning regularly every day, week or month. The periodical must, therefore, offer its readers models of identity which they can regularly recognize and indeed occupy and which they are prepared to pay for again and again. These identities may be aspirational as much as actual. (Beetham, 2000, p.95)

If we assume with Beetham that readers return to a magazine because it offers them a picture of themselves that they recognise or an ideal that they aspire to, then models of identity can be 'read off' the pages of the magazine. However, there is no guarantee that the 'target reader', the 'actual purchaser' and 'the reader constructed in the text' coincide. Instead, Beetham argues, we should think of the 'historical reader' as the dynamic result of a negotiation between these different positions. (Beetham, 2000, p.96) In most magazines it is possible to see this negotiation at work, because readers so often become contributors – through letters pages, advice columns, competitions, and sometimes even guest copy.[2] In the case of the photo-magazine, we can add to this list pictures, since many photo-magazines solicit photos which are then displayed in 'readers' galleries'. The magazine teaches its reader how to desire then, but this is not a one-way street, and through different modes of contribution, the reader engages in a dialogue with those forms of desire offered up by the magazine.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, it was fairly safe to assume that the subject of this photographic desire was male. With notable exceptions such as Cora Wright Kennedy,

regular staff writer for *Popular Photography* in the 1960s, the named contributors to photography magazines are almost exclusively male, as are the figures represented in images illustrating photographers. In addition, as the obsession with 'control' in Rothschild's review indicates, this is a heavily masculinist discourse. The same logic is at work in the visual material of photo-magazines in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, with the 'glamour' photo very prominent. Whether the actual readers were women or men, these magazines consistently elicited a masculine gaze. Finally, as Rothschild's meticulous and comprehensive review of the SX-70 demonstrates, there is in these magazines a stereotypically masculine preoccupation with technology, or what is now simply called 'gear'. In common with the earlier periodical press, which was given over in large part to reviewing, the photo-magazines always dedicated a considerable portion of their pages to this function, as befitted their role as arbiters and mediators of new photo-technology. This much has not changed. Every issue of *Photography Monthly* devotes its final twenty or so pages to 'Photo Gear', and in the August 23rd issue of *Amateur Photographer*, taking in advertising and reviews, just over fifty percent of the magazine is committed solely to the assessment and promotion of photographic equipment.

The commitment to technology alone gives a strong sense of the readership of these magazines, but a closer analysis brings out a more nuanced picture, starting with the *Photography Monthly* of February 2012. Its emphasis is almost exclusively on digital rather than film photography, and like most magazines, it is heterogeneous in content, mixing together images, advertising, news stories, reviews, competition pages, interviews, round tables, features and tips sections.[3] There is no letters page, but the magazine does dedicate a column each to comments from its 'fans' and 'followers' on Facebook and Twitter. In the former case, readers respond to prompts from the magazine both jocular ('Anybody else had

too many mince pies?') and serious ('What local landscapes encourage you to get creative?').

('From Facebook', 2012) The presence of readers is strongest in the seven-page 'Readers'

Gallery', where we find the best images which have been uploaded to the magazine's web-

site in January, and includes an 'Image of the Month', in this case a motocross racer spraying

mud. The other notable reader contribution is a book review by Adele Carne, a 24-year-old

'photography graduate with big dreams of running her own fashion and music portrait

business.' (Carne, 2012)

There could hardly be a clearer statement of the 'aspirational' dimension of the magazine

than Carne's description of herself. In fact, aspiration runs right through the issue, from the

reviews section on the latest desirable and expensive photo-products, to the envy for the

contents of professionals' camera bags ('Brad's Gear'; 'Inside Ezra's Kitbag') and the

emphasis on exotic travel, both in the features and in the advertising for 'safari photography'

trips. (In a tacit recognition that safaris may be out of the reach of many of its readers, the

issue includes a feature on techniques for photographing pigeons in town centres.) There is

also an abundance of tips and advice 'to help you become the photographer you want to be',

as the strapline for the 'Photo Technique' section puts it. Some of this advice might have

come straight out of the amateur photography magazines of an earlier epoch. Not in the

detail, of course, but in the assumption that the reader is looking for 'challenges', for

technically difficult photographic situations. As one of the interviewed professionals insists,

echoing Norman Rothschild forty years earlier, 'you have to take the camera off AUTO' if

you want to be creative. ('Hobbyists' Corner' 2012) In fact, the words 'creative' and

'creativity' are touchstones of value running right through the magazine, just as they did

through the magazines of earlier generations. To judge by the images in the 'Readers'

Gallery', and the magazine as a whole, creative challenges include stopping motion,

experiments with depth of focus, and the inventive use of light. The overwhelming emphasis is on landscape and nature photographs, with a large proportion of sunsets and sunrises. With images of animals the next largest category, there is no real departure from the conventional subject matter of the serious amateur of forty or fifty years previous. In sum, in *Photography Monthly*, the serious amateur combines an interest in technical innovation, a curiosity about new methods, and a conservatism of content.

At the same time it is apparent that the implied reader of *Photography Monthly* aspires to more than releasing this 'creativity' so familiar from the old discourse on the 'serious amateur'. Carne's guest review is part of a special section devoted to 'Turning Pro', which is in fact a magazine within the magazine, with its own front and back cover and editorial. As well as pragmatic counsel on setting up different kinds of photo-businesses, it includes a review of degree courses at Middlesex University. Meanwhile, in the Facebook letters section, the magazine asks readers if they are doing or have done a photography degree, and if the tuition fee rise will affect them. This sort of formalized training is of a different order from the workshops and short courses advertised at the back of the magazine. It suggests that the non-professional photographer addressed by *Photography Monthly* is more than a 'hobbyist', who, as the term suggests, separates the enthusiasm for photography from some other daily non-photographic activity. The vocabulary of the magazine may be as it ever was – creativity, challenges, the 'difficult shot' – but there is also a steady expectation, or at least a hope, that the amateur's passion for photography will translate into sustained financial reward.

One of the respondents to the Facebook prompt about degree courses is none other than Adele Carne, who therefore appears in two different places in the issue. Should she be taken

as the representative of today's aspirational amateur, telling us that this is no longer a stereotypically male preserve? Certainly, if we look at the list of paid contributors on the editorial page, *Photography Monthly* is not the male-dominated forum of the past. Five out of nine writers are women, including one who describes herself as 'a gadget girl'. In the Readers' Gallery there is a slightly different balance, with photos by men outnumbering those by women by approximately three to one. As for the overall visual regime of the magazine, glamour or fashion photos make up a smaller proportion of the overall image count than they might have in the past (approximately seven out of 140 images, with no 'tasteful nudes', a former staple of photo-magazines), but they are still there, while their counterparts, the ten images of sport, are all of men. However, the most telling fact is the following: in this single issue, fifteen professional photographers are profiled or interviewed in one form or another. They are presumably featured in the magazine as ideals for the aspirational amateur to strive towards, and they are all men. Is this a result of editorial bias, or simply an accurate reflection of the conditions facing the would-be professional photographer? Either way, it would appear that one of the greatest challenges facing the new breed of aspirational amateur keen to move into the profession is a familiar obstacle that has not changed since the 1960s.

In the more venerable publication, *Amateur Photographer*, the masculine status quo is even more solidly in place. The editor is a man, all three regular columnists are men, as indeed are all the named writers, and all four living professional photographers who are interviewed, or whose work is featured in the magazine, are men. The single exception is a story about the celebrated Chicago street photographer Vivian Maier, whose work came to light posthumously and is the subject of a feature film and a BBC documentary. Where *Photography Monthly* has a 'Readers' Gallery', *Amateur Photography* has a 'Reader Portfolio', in this case showcasing the work of two male readers. Interestingly, there is one

contribution from a female reader, in the letters page. Kathryn J. Scorah writes in to say that there is still a reluctance to take women seriously as photographers, and asks if the magazine might 'redress the balance a little' by showing some of her images, which it does, but printed in a very small size. ('Inbox', 2014) *Amateur Photographer* sometimes invokes the 'artistic' as an ideal, but its rhetoric on creativity is muted compared to *Photography Monthly*, although like *Photography Monthly* it emphasises the importance of *difficulty* in photography, with its central feature stories on techniques for getting good portraits of indigenous peoples in exotic locales, and for capturing recalcitrant, even dangerous, wildlife.

[Figure 2 about here – cover, *Amateur Photographer*]

Writing in the 1990s about photography magazines, Julian Stallabrass observed that

> photographers are constantly urged to do the unusual, to break with clichéd subject matter and handling, but simultaneously they must also learn about a complex structure of rigid genres and their associated techniques….Each rule is discrete, parasitic on subject matter, and taken together they have little coherent shape (Stallabrass, 1996, p.20)

It is the only time in his influential essay 'Sixty Billion Sunsets' that Stallabrass uses the term 'genre', which he does not define beyond hinting that genres involve 'rigidity'. Instead, he returns quickly to his preferred 'subject matter', a flatter term which resonates more closely with Barthes's view that a photograph is a direct 'analogon' of the real. Whether we refer to genres or subject matter, the Reader Portfolio in *Amateur Photographer*, like the *Photography Monthly* Readers' Gallery, gives us a good sense of how little the photographic hierarchies of a 'fervent practice' have changed in the digital era. In each portfolio the reader

is given five images. The first portfolio consists of images of cars and motorbikes by Jeffrey Eatley, with praise from the magazine for his achievements with close-ups, with inventive use of flash, with composite shooting, and with use of diffused light. For each image we are given details of camera types, exposure length, aperture and film speed – obligatory content for a technophilic practice, and for distinguishing this photography from casual snapshots. The same sort of details are provided for the second portfolio, by Richard Hurst, and in this case featuring coastal landscapes which are in turn praised by the magazine for their composition, use of filters, and light. In *Photography Monthly*, meanwhile, there are twenty-one images, each from a different reader-contributor, and consequently with a wider range of genres represented, none of them stretching beyond the familiar canons of which Stallabrass despairs: landscapes, architecture, glamour, street photography, wildlife, motorsports are all present. Many of these images may have been discreetly modified after the fact in Adobe Photoshop, and perhaps two are composite images made possible by digital software, but otherwise there is no sense that they are responding to the new photographic landscape of the camera phone and the networked image.

Besides their reliance on recognisable and longstanding categories of advanced amateur practice, the images contributed by readers to the two magazines are unified by their steadfast refusal of the family function. So, Eatley's portfolio in *Amateur Photographer* may contain motor vehicles – integral elements of domestic life – but three aspects of his images clearly separate them from any hint of the domestic: the absence of any people; their *mise-en-scène*, isolated by lighting and context from references to family; and the choice of vehicles (a Humvee, a classic motorcycle, a collector's Bel Air), none of them a family sedan. Equally, Hurst's coastal scenes, whether they are fjords in Norway, low tides in Dorset, or rocky beaches, are devoid of any human presence that might connote tourist or holiday snap. The

same logic applies in the readers' images in *Photography Monthly*. Although some of them allude aspirationally to professional practice (fashion, sports or music journalism), none of the staple figures or events of domestic photography are to be found here: landscapes and architectural shots are empty of people, and there are no weddings, babies, or holidays snaps to signal photography's role in constituting the family and its narrative. Where there are allusions to such traditions (a puppy with a tennis ball; a mother and child), contamination by the family function is mitigated by the site of shooting (studio), or film type and composition (black and white, asymmetrical). There is not a selfie to be seen, not even an ironic one, nor does either issue appear to draw on the new rich seam of vernacular photography that takes the everyday as its subject matter (images, as Susan Murray argues, of 'the small and mundane', a 'navigation and documentation of daily life' (Murray, 2013, p.166)), and that makes use of popular filtering apps such as Instagram or Hipstamatic. In *Photography Monthly's* online gallery, images tagged 'Landscape' number 17,000, 'Portraits' 13,000, 'Nature' 11,500, and 'Wildlife/Pets' 10,000, while 'Art Filter Images' come in at a mere 64, and pictures labelled Instagram amount to only 326. ('Gallery', 2014).

And yet, even as these readers' images distance themselves from more popular vernacular practices, they remain indebted to them. Although there are no pictures of domestic pets in the print version of *Photography Monthly* for February 2012, only of more difficult to shoot wild animals, there is a certain amount of slippage in the online galleries, obliging the keepers of those galleries to concede the category 'Wildlife/Pets'. Both magazines give examples of and guidance on travel photography, much of which goes towards composing the 'Landscape', 'Nature' and 'Portraits' categories. These may all studiously avoid looking like typical tourist snaps, but it is only a small step from the magazines' images of famous buildings, breathtaking vistas, and characterful locals to Aunt Edna in front of the Eiffel

Tower or Uncle Reg atop the Grand Canyon. As for Jeffrey Eatley's fetishizing pictures of shining red classic cars torn from any social context, this is merely the thinnest of disguises for that most familiar of scenes found in any photo album from the 50s, 60s, 70s: a new owner's economic success and successful participation in consumer culture solemnized by the proud portrait in front of a shining new car. In *Amateur Photographer* the selfie does in fact make an appearance, but only as amusing miscellany, in the form of a small news story announcing that an A Level in Sociology will include selfies in its syllabus on social media, the examination board insisting that 'it is "not a soft option"'. ('News round-up', 2014)

Like any magazines, *Photography Monthly* and *Amateur Photographer* are complex assemblages of different kinds of text and image which surely cater simultaneously to a number of distinct audiences. A more in-depth study would have to analyze even more closely the codes and conventions governing the images in the magazine, taking in a comparative dimension: we would need to ask, for instance, how these images relate to or differ from photography in art magazines. A good starting point would be *Photography Monthly*'s online gallery of images submitted by readers. The size of this gallery is daunting, but miniscule in comparison with the gargantuan storehouses of Flickr or Photobucket, and at least *Photography Monthly* does some of the work for us, by asking readers to tag their images according to a manageable number of pre-determined categories.

While the big data algorithm processors could no doubt give us some insight into the patterns at work in the online collections of photographic images stored by photo-magazines, it may be that we need to look elsewhere to determine what has changed post-digital in advanced amateur practice, since on the face of it, very little is different in terms of favoured subject matter. With cameras in the hands of so many now, and advanced amateurs finding the

grounds of their distinction increasingly eroded, they are turning again to what we might call technical capital in order to mark their practice out from the selfie-taking networked photographer. In this vein, some scholars suggest that it is no longer so much what is photographed that distinguishes the two types of photographer, but the choices made in the storage and circulation of digital images. So, for example, in his ingenious history of the JPEG file, Daniel Palmer claims that this ubiquitous and convenient file type (although perhaps not quite a genre) is looked down upon by some:

> For 'serious' amateurs and professional photographers, JPEGs have come to be considered as degraded, even inauthentic, copies of a camera's sensors. These photographers prefer so-called RAW and DNG files, which are akin to 'digital originals', wherein the data is uncompressed and camera settings are saved separately from the image data. (Palmer, 2013, p.155)

A similar sort of logic is at work in the photographer's decision on whether to post images on Facebook or Flickr, the two largest photo-sharing sites in the world. In her detailed analysis of the community-building aspects of Flickr, Susan Murray argues that Flickr is the favoured platform of those photographers engaged in what Bourdieu called a 'fervent practice.' These enthusiasts are likely to choose Flickr over Facebook because the former 'provides an interface that, more than any other social media platform, emphasizes the *practice* of photography and overtly addresses its members as practitioners, artists, and/or image-makers.' (Murray, 2013, p.167) In sum, Flickr is primarily a photo-sharing site which allows its users to network with each other and form online communities; and Facebook is primarily a networking site which allows users to share photos. It may seem like the narcissism of minor differences, but on such differences distinction hangs.

References

Barthes, R. (1977) *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana).

Barthes, R. (1984) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard
(London: Flamingo).

Baudelaire, C. (1980) 'The Modern Public and Photography', in Alan Trachtenberg (ed.)
Classic Essays on Photography (New Haven: Leete's Island Books), pp. 83-9.

Beetham, M. (1990) 'Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre,' in Laurel
Brake, Aled Jones and Lionel Madden (eds) *Investigating Victorian Journalism*
(Basingstoke: Macmillan), pp.19-32.

Beetham, M. (1998) 'The Reinvention of the English Domestic Woman: Class and "race" in
the 1890s' woman's magazine', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23(3), 223-
233.

Beetham, M. (2000) 'In Search of the Historical Reader: the Woman Reader, the Magazine
and the Correspondence Column', *Siegener Periodicum zur Internationalen
Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft*, 19:1, 89-104.

Bourdieu, P. (1990) *Photography: A Middle Brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford:
Stanford University Press).

Carne. A (2012) 'The Bigger Picture', *Photography Monthly* 131, February, 55.

Chalfen. R (1987) *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State
University Popular Press).

Collins, D. (1990) *The Story of Kodak* (New York: Harry N. Abrams).

Crawley, G. (1989) 'Colour comes to all,' in *The Kodak Museum: the Story of Popular
Photography* (ed.) C. Ford (London: Century).

Dowd, G. (2006) 'Introduction: Genre Matters in Theory and Criticism,' in G. Dowd, L. Stevenson and J. Strong (eds) *Genre Matters: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (Bristol: Intellect), pp.11-27.

Duff, D. (2000) 'Introduction,' in David Duff (ed.) *Modern Genre Theory* (Harlow: Pearson), pp.1-24.

Elkins, J. (ed.) (2007) *Photography Theory* (London: Routledge).

'From Facebook' (2012) *Photography Monthly* 131, February, 88.

Frow, J. (2006) *Genre* (New York: Routledge).

'Gallery', http://www.photographymonthly.com/Gallery (homepage), date accessed 20 October 2014.

Hand, M. (2012) *Ubiquitous Photography* (Cambridge: Polity).

'Hobbyist's Corner' (2012) *Photography Monthly* 131, February, 12-14.

'Inbox' (2014) *Amateur Photographer,* 23 August, 18.

Langford, M. (2001) *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press).

Lister, M. (2013) 'Introduction', in Martin Lister (ed.) *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge), pp.1-21.

Murray, S. (2013) 'New Media and Vernacular Photography: Revisiting Flickr' in Martin Lister (ed.) *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, pp.165-82.

'News round-up' (2014) *Amateur Photographer*, 23 August, 4.

Palmer, D. (2013) 'The Rhetoric of the JPEG', in Martin Lister (ed.) *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, pp.149-64.

Rosenblum, N. (1997) *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press).

Rothschild, N. (1973) 'How the SX-70 Film Compares to Others', *Popular Photography*, April.

'Selfiecity'a (2014) *British Journal of Photography*, 161 (7826), July, 82-3.

'Selfiecity'b (2014) http://selfiecity.net (homepage), date accessed 27 August 2014.

Stallabrass, J. (1996) 'Sixty Billion Sunsets' in *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture*
　　(London: Verso), pp.13-39.

Stallabrass, J. (2014) 'On Selfies', *London Review of Books*, June 5, p.20.

Tifentale, A. (2014) 'The Selfie: Making Sense of the "Masturbation of Self-Image" and the
　　"Virtual Mini-Me",
　　http://d25rsf93iwlmgu.cloudfront.net/downloads/Tifentale_Alise_Selfiecity.pdf , date
　　accessed 29 August 2014.

---

[1] *Photography Monthly* ceased print publication in January 2015, becoming a purely online periodical.

[2] For more on letters pages in magazines see Margaret Beetham (1998) 'The Reinvention of the English Domestic Woman: Class and "race" in the 1890s' woman's magazine', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23(3), 223-233.

[3] On the mixed content of magazines, see Margaret Beetham (1990) 'Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre,' in Laurel Brake, Aled Jones and Lionel Madden (eds) *Investigating Victorian Journalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan), pp.19-32, pp.24-5.