

TEA BAG PHOTOGRAPHY.

To say that the arrival of digital has changed photography is like saying that supermarkets now sell a lot of food but has that change been all for the good.

(rant alert)

There is no doubt that digital cameras have awakened people to the pastime of photography in a way probably unprecedented and it's certainly true that more women and juniors have been attracted to the hobby. The idea of having total control over output, the chance to play without it costing the earth and the wealth of information and photographic community websites make photography a far less solitary experience than it once might have been. You don't have to wait for the monthly meeting in a darkened back room of a pub to talk with fellow enthusiasts; you can do that with a mug of coffee, whilst sat in your kitchen watching Jeremy Kyle.

The learning curve has suddenly become easier, quicker. You can now have your work viewed and criticized by dozens of people within minutes of you having taken it. You can ask any question you like and be supplied instantly with a raft of answers to your problem. Photography has escaped from its pipe-smoking, beard wearing, elbow patched darkroom, ditched its dodgy lingered front cover and become accessible, fresh and instant.

Excellent – though with all things in life, you'll need a pinch of salt, possibly a thick skin and know that everything is not always what it seems – especially on the World Wide Web.

Michael: I've been taking photo's of rally cars in the dark using flash but they always come out blurred – any tips.

Tom: What shutter speed are you using?

Michael: 1/250.

Tom: Your shutter speed is too slow, try setting it at 1/1000sec.

Michael: Thanks for that.

...or...

Caroline: Can anybody tell me what would be the best aperture to use when taking a portrait?

Helen: You have to use whatever aperture you can get away with but the smaller the aperture the more you get in focus, so I always use the iso that let's me use f16 or more.

Caroline: That's great because I was told that I needed a wide aperture.

Helen: It's very difficult to get things in focus with a wide aperture. So best to get the smallest you can.

Caroline: ☺ That's a great help.

Sometimes the answers are just plain...well...unexplainable.

Brian: I'm having problems with my Lee filters, can anybody help.

Alan: Well I don't have any problems with mine.

Thick skin needed you see.

The trouble is how do you know that the advice - and that's any advice - is good advice. Alright, so most of the time, you'll learn if it was or not, simply by taking your camera and following the instruction given. It will either work or not work but there are times when advice can be costly.

A few years ago, a member of a much frequented photographic website asked for advice on a forum. To cut a long story short, he was unemployed and had been taking photographs for about a year, maybe a couple of months more than that. He was about to borrow £1000 to set himself up with a market stall in the North East, because, in his words, there were not many good photographs around of Northumberland.

Bearing in mind that particular coastline has to be one of the most photographed in the UK and also the standard of his work in comparison to what was available, my advice was not to borrow £1000 at that moment in time, but to build up a better portfolio and maybe sell the odd piece of work en-route via galleries and gift shops. I felt that £1000 was simply too much of a burden to place on someone who was unemployed and, at that time, inexperienced.

However, he was soon inundated with his web-friends telling him how fantastic he was and to go right ahead and borrow that money. I soon became public enemy number one and for a moment it looked like I might even have killed his pet frog. He claimed he was being bullied – the great mud sling of the web – and that he hadn't asked for advice.....actually.

The result was that he borrowed the money, sold very few pictures at the market, gave some more away to a couple of local hotels and very nearly packed photography in altogether, so painful was the experience. It's very easy to advise when it's not your money that you're losing.

And here's the problem of the web and the photographic community. Post enough photo's on enough sites and very soon you'll build up enough of those web-friends waiting to tell you how fantastic you are and very soon you'll come to believe it. The next thing is to get yourself a website, advertise your professional services and then when you suddenly get an enquiry, go rushing back to the web asking how much to charge and what set-up you'll need to undertake the job. All you'll learn is what other people will charge and they may be better paid than you in their day job and able to charge peanuts. There must be ten times as many professional photographers out there than there were ten years ago; there are certainly more wedding photographers but probably less knowledge of the trade amongst them. You've heard the phrase – 'The Internet is for Porn' – perhaps it's – 'The Internet is for Porn and Photography' because it seems there are as many Professional Photographer websites as there are porn sites....so I'm told.

Now before I get accused of being a bitter old pro, I must add that there is no bitterness just a certain amount of concern.

Photographic websites also tend to encourage styles particular to that site. Person A has some success with a particular image and this prompts person B,C,D and E to try and emulate it, which in turn has F,G,H,I and J doing the same and before you know it, on that website it's the only way to photograph that subject.

A well known Garden and Plant Photographer, perhaps the best known in the UK, joined a photo website and started posting images that were commercially viable to illustrate what was selling in the market at that time but of course they did not fit in with the current trend on that particular site. His arrival was greeted with less than enthusiasm with members linking to other members whose work they considered superior. To his credit, the photographer did not point out that he pretty much invented the style used by that member and had gone on from there some years ago and continued to post photo's for a while until he waned and departed.

An even better known Landscape Photographer joins a web site and starts posting. He's already on a hiding to nothing as a web sized version of a scan of a large format slide does not transpose its infinite detail. The members largely ignore him, permeated as they are with their own 'experts' they do not need to utilise the knowledge that this man might be willing to give and to be fair, his own work does not sit easily with melodramatic landscapes favoured by the websites members, so he too eventually fades and vanishes.

Two cases where advice sought had more chance of being good advice and not enough people cared.

I remember a few years ago going to view an exhibition given by a well known member of a popular photo website. I had looked forward to it as I did admire the work of this particular photographer and it seemed that he was building a name for himself. It was one of those occasions when the limitations of viewing images on the web came into stark reality. In this instance, it was the poor quality of the prints but more apparent was the softness of many of the images; in fact it was difficult to see one area that was actually sharp. One of the photos had been a particular favourite of mine when viewed on the website and yet there it was framed on the wall and it was nigh on impossible to see where the photographer had focused, the area that should have been pin sharp was not and it let the image down.

I went home thinking that maybe it was my eyesight, maybe I was being overly critical, maybe I was seeing something that wasn't there. A year later I got a call from a major camera manufacturer asking if I would look at some RAW files sent in by a customer. His complaint was that using their latest top of th range camera with the best lenses, he could not get a sharp image nor enough depth of field. A study of the exif data and the recorded focusing points showed that the photographer was focusing in completely the wrong

place to achieve the maximum focal depth and that also he was auto-focusing in extremely low light and expecting the camera to lock onto, for instance, the black rock and be absolutely spot on.

It was the same photographer whose work I had seen in exhibition.

The web combined with digital has created an army of Professional Photographers and as a result the role of the Professional Photographer has become diluted and downgraded. The immediacy of digital has made photography as a whole, come to be seen as a throw away media. Easily created and easily forgotten. Already we see photo buyers searching personal websites in the hope of fulfilling a specific requirement on the cheap whilst members of the public are encouraged to send in their photos to newspapers and television with little hope of any recompense.

We now have a market where national companies place job adverts for full time photographers and offer £12,000/pa and expect them to provide their own equipment. Mind you, the advert does state that training will be given, so maybe I'm being hard on them. Actually no I'm not – this particular company have placed their own relevance of importance on the front end of their product and it's £12,000/pa, fully expecting that they will probably need to train their 'Professional' how to turn the camera on at the very least.

A couple of days ago, I listened to a Tea Producer in India talking about how the mass production of black tea for supermarket shelf tea bags was bringing the quality of the product down as a whole. It was difficult, he claimed, to sell the high-end connoisseur leaf tea to a customer brought up on instant mass produced bags. The market had become diluted and was suffering from the sheer volume of an inferior product that had now become accepted as the norm.

I am saying that photography is going the same way. Too much average work being steeped in hyperbole to the extent that it becomes accepted as being the norm and even something to aspire to.

It is also a case that not only has the digital photography speeded up the production of photo's but coupled with the web has increased the volume that we, as photographers, now view on a daily basis. Back in the day, when the only way to see other people's work outside of your local camera club, was to buy a magazine, we saw less photography, certainly less from the amateur market. That which we did see had at least undergone some form of editing and scrutiny, in that it had been deemed fit for publication.

In this web based world we now inhabit, it is possible to see hundreds of new photo's every day. The job of sorting the wheat from the chaff has been put in your hands and yes, that's good news but it's when people are fooled and easily led by gangs of web-buddies praising mediocrity and plain rubbish that we see a problem, at least in so much as mediocrity is given a chance to breed at a much faster rate.

The web has also altered the speed at which the market takes on new styles and subjects. Somebody develops a new approach or discovers a new location and pretty soon it will be copied or trampled upon until before you can say Tetley's it's become jaded and almost clichéd. I reached a point some time ago when I twitched and retched every time I saw a photograph of Curbar Edge. I would involuntarily swear each time I saw Whitby Pier and woe betide anybody sat near me when a photograph of a water droplet appeared.

Thankfully I've now recovered but then I have stopped looking at photo's on the web in the quantity I once did, though like a recovering alcoholic, I balance on a thin tightrope of temptation.

Fact is the Internet is a beautiful thing, one of the great inventions of the 20thC and I couldn't work or live without it but there are times when I wish it was smaller, slower and had fewer photo's of dead trees on Rannoch Moor.