

GCSE Photography

Unit Three— Inside Plato's Cave.

Unit One of this course concerned itself with the 'How' of photography. Unit Two looked at the 'What'. Unit Three concerned itself with the 'Why'.

In this unit we will be looking at different photographers and their motivation to produce the work that they have.

The implication of this unit is that photographers are driven by much more than the desire to produce pretty pictures. One such photographer is Duane Michals who describes many photographers as 'fartsters'. A fartster is a photographer who takes fashion photographs, but believes he is creating art. A photographer who, fundamentally fails to distinguish between producing marketing images (for themselves or a client) and the creative potential of the subject. This is not to say that the fartster is a poor photographer. He may be highly accomplished. Is he an artist though? If we wish photography to be considered an art, then the photographer must be driven to break out of simply making pretty pictures.

In the Theses on Feuerbach, Karl Marx famously wrote, "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." The fartster hasn't even started to interpret the world around him. He is still mesmerised by the pretty images he sees before him. He doesn't see the potential for art in what he does, but believes that art is what he is creating nonetheless.

This Unit takes the view that the fundamental starting point of creating art through photography is interpretation. It's aspiration should be change.

The fartster is still sitting in the cave famously described by Plato, in the darkness, watching the flickering images created by dancing shadows, convinced that he sees and understands the world, but in reality seeing something quite different.

So, to begin, let's examine Plato's cave.

Plato uses the technique of allegory. An allegory is a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one. In other words, it's a way of making a point through the telling of a story.

Plato's allegory of the cave is an attempt to show us that we do not necessarily understand the world around us without education.

GCSE Photography

Unit Three— Inside Plato's Cave.

So, imagine a group of people sitting in the gloom of a cave. They are prisoners, bound by their hands and feet, unable to move freely. All they can do is sit in a line and look straight ahead at the wall of the cave.

Now imagine that you are one of those shackled prisoners. However, you do not know you are a prisoner because you were born in the cave and it is the only life you have ever known. Because of the darkness of the cave, you cannot even see the other prisoners - although you know they are there, because you can talk to each other.

Every day on the cave wall in front of you, you see shapes pass back and forth. You and your fellow prisoners recognise these different shapes and give them names such as 'cat' or 'tree' or 'girl'. Amongst yourselves, you see who can be the best at telling which image will come along next. You are satisfied with your life because you cannot imagine anything different.

But unknown to you, your life in the cave is not a full picture of the truth. If we look behind you and your fellow prisoners, we can see that a walled roadway passes through the cave. People carry life-sized cut-outs of objects such as 'cats', 'trees' or 'girls' along this path.

If we pull back further still, we can see a fire burning away fiercely. This fire creates shadows of the life-sized cut-outs that are carried across in front of it. It is these shadows that you and the other prisoners are watching on the cave wall. What you think is true, is actually only a flat, shadowy copy of reality.

Now, imagine you are suddenly freed from your chains. You stand up and turn around for the first time... You cannot understand what you are seeing! A bright light that dazzles you! Clear objects and people that before you had only seen in gloomy shadows!

Confused, you walk past the fire and the walled roadway, and towards another light - and you find yourself outside in fresh air and daylight. The darkness of the cave has been left behind and for the first time in this new, outside world, you see colours and shapes. How terrible to have only seen shadows before!

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Now your eyes have adjusted to the light, you look up and see the sun shining brightly in the sky. You begin to think - if the fire in the cave was responsible for creating those shadows on the wall, then it must be the sun that brings this better world to life.

Realising that you have been living a lie and have only been watching a shadow-play, you rush back to the other prisoners to tell them the truth. But they laugh at you and do not believe what you say! How can they? They have never seen anything but the inside of the cave and the shadows projected on the wall.

Of course, the point about allegory is that you do not take the story literally. In this case it is not the case that photographers are living a lie, but it might be true to say that many photographers do not look beyond the composition of a shot.

This Unit will argue that a truly great photographer is one that does just that; looks beyond the frame of the composition to a wider, deeper view of the world. Many photographers cannot or will not take this step. That's fine. It is perfectly valid to argue that the purpose of learning about photography is to take better photographs of your family or your holidays.