

# On the Teaching Improvement of Fictional Art Photography

**Kan Qing**

School of Fine Arts, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

**Email address:**

Kanqing@njnu.edu.cn

**To cite this article:**

Kan Qing. On the Teaching Improvement of Fictional Art Photography. *Education Journal*. Vol. 11, No. 6, 2022, pp. 372-376.

doi: 10.11648/j.edu.20221106.19

**Received:** December 2, 2022; **Accepted:** December 26, 2022; **Published:** December 29, 2022

---

**Abstract:** With the development of computer networks and social media, photographic images are becoming more and more widely used in art, daily life and business. Technical difficulties have been gradually solved by camera manufacturers, and creating photographic works seems to become much simpler. In today's technological and cultural context, teachers' teaching contents and methods should be gradually improved in order to improve the teaching quality of art photography-related courses and promote students to create excellent art photography works. Fictional art photography has an important place in the history of early photography and in the development of modern art. Teachers should focus on analyzing the creative methods of typical fictional art photographers. The creation of excellent fictional artworks requires a remarkable imagination. Imagination through meditation, imagination through key words, and imagination through sketching are three ways to effectively stimulate imagination in teaching. The ability to set the scene is a fundamental skill in the art of fictional photography, and it is very important, but often under-appreciated in teaching. In teaching scenography ability, students need to learn the master photographers' high planning ability, rigorous attitude and meticulous working style. Due to the limited funds available for teaching, students need to be encouraged to use low-cost scenery solutions as much as possible. In order to achieve better artistic results, teachers should also guide students to highlight traditional national aesthetic features and contemporary characteristics in their scenes. In this paper, we discuss the importance of fictional photography, the importance of stimulating students' imagination, and the importance of teaching photographic scenography to improve the teaching of fictional art photography, and provide suggestions for improving the teaching of these three priorities. It is hoped that this will provide some inspiration for improving the teaching of art photography in higher education.

**Keywords:** Fictional Photography, Art Photography, Photography Teaching, Imagination, Scenography

---

## 1. Introduction

From Daguerre's (Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, 1787-1851) silver plate photography published in 1939 to today's digital photography, the development of technology and equipment has led to significant changes in the creation, application, and dissemination of photography. Most of the technical difficulties of photography, such as tone control, intelligent focusing, high-definition rendering, and color science, have been simplified, or even eliminated, by camera manufacturing companies. Computer 3D art and digital art have reached a considerable height. Under such technical conditions and artistic contexts, the focus of teaching higher education in photography is no longer on basic technology either. From what direction to improve photography education, so that photography education can meet the needs

of the future, this is a topic of great concern to photography educators and photography experts.

Some scholars have already perceived that photography technology should not be the core of higher education in photography. Gu Zheng, a famous scholar, believes that "What is the problem with China's higher photography education? The biggest problem is the lack of awareness and ability to implement humanistic education in photography education. The lack of urgency refers to the fact that many of those who are involved in photography education have not considered photography as a means of human cultural expression and information dissemination." [1] Liu Xiaoxia believes that: from the perspective of linguistics, technology is the basis of image expression, and the acquisition and output of photographic language is based on the combination of technology and humanistic cultivation. [2] Mr. Wei Ji Ke argues that: photography as an art discipline photography

education is conducive to better resource support for relevant colleges and research institutions if it rises to the discipline rather than just staying at the professional level of applied technology. It is also believed that the focus of improving photography education lies in culture. [3] According to Associate Professor Wang Shuai of Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, "The traditional way of knowledge transfer has become a thing of the past, and it is now more important to cultivate the ability to summarize and sort out a large amount of knowledge. The mastery of professional and industry knowledge is only one side, with independent thinking and judgment ability, solid cultural foundation is the most important. .... photography can only acquire real development if it integrates into the issues of culture, returns to the scene of life, possesses social consciousness and human emotions, and becomes a participant of experimentation and practice." [4] Although the scholars have their own views on teaching photography, it is the consensus of most photography education experts that they are not bound by traditional photography techniques.

The teaching of traditional photographic techniques is not efficient in stimulating students' artistic creativity. In the field of art photography teaching, especially in art schools, fictional art photography is becoming more and more important to teachers and students. Such a creative approach tests students' creative abilities and exercises photographic techniques. Compared with direct photography teaching, fictional art photography teaching is more difficult, not only from the technical aspect, but also for the students' imagination, expression, modeling ability, and literary cultivation comprehensive requirements. Therefore, it is necessary to provide systematic guidance and professional training for students who are qualified in this area in order to achieve satisfactory results.

## 2. Establishing the Importance of Fictional Photography in Teaching

Fiction has an important role in the development of human culture and art. Human civilization broke away from animal civilization when humans began to make fictional stories based on reality. This shows the importance of fiction. Fictional stories are a way for people to spread their beliefs and culture. Without fiction myths, legends, and novels could not have been formed. The fictional approach to creation is widely used extremely widely in literature, painting, music, film and television. Yuval Heraly writes in his article, "The best description of Homo sapiens is that he is a storytelling animal. We create the fictional stories about gods, nations and corporations that form the basis of our society and the source of the meaning of our lives. We know more truths than any other animal, but we believe more fictional stories. But only humans will kill each other for stories, and my argument is that if we really want to understand human history, we must take our fictional stories seriously." He argues that when man is able to make the display of fiction a non-reality, when man does not recognize reality as reality, when he makes a fiction

of a pure state of mind about reality, man unfolds civilization away from the animal state of mind." [5]

Fictional art photography occupies an important place in contemporary art and should be given attention in the teaching of photography. According to some scholars, "As the basic narrative of video and video art, fiction and nonfiction and how to dialectically apply both have become important progressions for video artists to intervene in reality or reconstruct the relationship between image and society." [6] The rise of fictional photography has a complex background of the times and ideas. For fictional photography, the pursuit of authenticity is no longer the central issue, but the use of multiple techniques to achieve its fictionality (either a mixture of fictional reality, or conceptual, imaginary, emotional, dream, fantasy, memory, subconscious ....) is the central issue; the originality that modernist art holds as its soul is also not the central issue. Cindy Sherman, Richard Price, Sherrie Levine and others directly appropriated classical or commercial images to construct their works, without being bound by the concept of "originality" in any way. Thus, fictional photography has a strong postmodern artistic identity. [7]

Photography can be seen as a medium of information dissemination as well as a means of artistic creation. As a medium of information dissemination, objective communication is more prominent, while as an artistic creation, the subjectivity of photography is more important. Some scholars also believe that "the perfect combination of technology and art is the most significant feature of photography. Photography was born in scientific research and developed with the development of science and technology." [8] Fictional photography, as an important creative method since the invention of photography, has been subject to a lot of controversy in the development of artistic photography. Today, there are still many photography exhibitions and competitions that prohibit post-editing of photographic works. There are also many judges and photographers who believe that direct presentation photography is the only authentic form of photography. Such a view is biased and hinders the development of artistic photography.

Fictional creation is an important part of photography education under the discipline of art studies. Photography currently appears in several disciplines of higher education in a variety of majors. Examples include journalism and communication, medicine, surveying and mapping, geography, and art. As different disciplines have different requirements for the photographic movement. In journalism and documentary photography the use of fictional photography cannot be granted. In art, however, fictional photography is to be encouraged. This is because photography, as a form of artistic creation, must have a high degree of freedom. A high degree of creative freedom is what allows the photographic artist to give full play to his or her imagination and creativity.

First, the importance of photography in the development of art needs to be emphasized in the teaching of photography. For example, in the 19th century, the emergence of photography brought a shock to the entire field of Western

painting. From a historical point of view, after photography fixed the presentation of the camera obscura on silver plates, glass and other media, many painters realized that painting was greatly threatened. From the business side, portrait painting received a huge impact from portrait photography. When people had photographic photographs, the expected purpose of painting was not only to portray the portrait faithfully. The creative approach and artistic value of realistic painting was impacted, and some professional painters were driven to the brink. It is thus evident that photography forced painting to save itself from its competitors.

Secondly, it is recognized in the teaching that fictional photography is not a new method of photography, but an ancient and common method. As early as the invention of photography, photographers such as Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Julia Margaret Cameron began to use fictional photography. In the early days of the invention of photography, it was impossible to capture people and events because the sensitivity was very low and the light-sensitive material required exposures of about 15 minutes or even several hours. Shooting portraits also required the use of an iron frame to hold the head of the person. Because of the complex photographic process at that time, the cost of materials and labor were worth a lot of money, so most of them were pre-designed poses, backgrounds, light, etc., and carefully arranged before pressing the shutter. The tradition of posing and the technical limitations of exposure time caused fictional photography to occupy a major position in the early days of photography's invention. The development of surreal photography advanced the use of fictional photography. Surrealist photography emerged in the 1930s and promoted the exploration of the human mind. Andre Breton defined it in his *Surrealist Manifesto* as follows: "Surrealism, masculine term. The purely mental unconscious activity. Through this activity, one expresses the true role of the mind, either verbally or in writing, or in some other way. To the exclusion of all aesthetic or moral prejudices, one is governed by the mind when not controlled by reason. .... Surrealism is based on the belief in reality, in the omnipotence of the fantastic, in the objective activity of thought, although it ignores certain associative forms of reality. The goal of surrealism is to eventually destroy all other mechanisms of the suprapyschic and replace them with solutions to the main problems of life" [9] Photographers such as Man Ray, Philip Holsman, and André Cortez have made outstanding contributions to surrealist photography.

Again, there is a need to acknowledge in teaching that fictional photography had played a leading role in the development of modern art. For example, Man Ray (1890-1976) was one of the pioneers of contemporary art and a representative figure of surrealist photography. Born in Philadelphia, USA, Man Ray went to Paris with Duchamp in 1921 and gained fame and success in the art world. His famous works "Angell's Violin", "Teardrop" and "Lips" are all realistic in their fictional photographic appeal. Although his works appear to be more exaggerated than reality or somewhat grotesque, they achieve artistic effects well. In the

West, Alfred Stieglitz, Andy Warhol and others have also made attempts in fictional photography, strengthening the popularity of photography in the modern art world. In China, Lang Jingshan, a pioneer of Chinese art photography, created his assemblage photography with virtual photography. His works fully reflect the aesthetics of Chinese landscapes and the mood of Chinese painting and poetry, and his works reflect the Chinese aesthetic pursuit of elegance, ethereality and freedom. Lang Jinshan's photographs are not a direct reflection of reality, but the result of his selective planning, collection of photographic materials, post-darkroom collage and modification. The Chinese aesthetic mood and technical characteristics presented by his works are praised by people inside and outside the photography industry, and have won many awards in photography salons worldwide, reflecting the recognition of fictional art photography influenced by traditional Chinese aesthetics by the jury of photography salons in the global field.

From the perspective of both art history and photography history, fictional art photography occupies an important position. In the teaching of photography under the discipline of art, sufficient class time should be allocated for teaching and practicing fictional photography. In addition, fictional art photography should be given sufficient attention in art exhibitions and photography competitions.

### 3. Enhance Imagination in Teaching

Imagination is an important source of creativity in the creation of fictional photography. With social changes and the emergence of new technologies, the importance of imagination and creativity in today's society is becoming more and more prominent. Especially with the advancement of the third industrial revolution, the Information Age no longer seems to be a thorough description of the current human society, and it will gradually be replaced by the Imagination Age. [10] Imagination is the driving force that drives society forward, so it should be a key concern in teaching, especially in art disciplines. According to Mr. Zhang Xiaoling, "..... In this huge historical transformation, any work that lacks imagination and creativity cannot enter the contemporary value system. The nature of art history is that it likes the new and hates the old, and what it can receive is never the most creative, the most contemporary, the most personal genius, and thus the most dynamic part." [11] From this we can see the importance of imagination for artistic creation. Mr. Lu Fengxian, a veteran photography educator, believes that "in teaching photography courses in design majors in art colleges today, one should be able to teach both technique and creativity, and more importantly, one should be able to try to teach creation." [12] It is thus clear that imagination is an important criterion for evaluating artists and artworks. In teaching, students' imagination can be stimulated and enhanced through various training methods.

Short meditations are a good way to promote imagination in teaching. In the 1980s, Joe Kabagin introduced the concept of "meditation" as a way to promote imagination. In the

1980s, Joe Kabagin introduced Mindfulness into the field of psychology and conducted a series of rigorous, scientific experiments on Mindfulness training, creating the effective Mindfulness Stress Reduction Therapy, which defines Mindfulness as an individual's intentional, present, non-judgmental awareness of current experience. [13] According to Dr. Cui Donghong, a researcher at the Mental Health Center affiliated with the Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine, "..... meditation develops the wisdom of human understanding of complex things through the comprehension and realization of the universe, human beings, and all things through the consciousness in fixation. At the same time, through the realization of self-nature and mindfulness in the fixation, it develops awareness and improves comprehension, creativity, and inspiration, which are awarenesses born from the mind, rather than cognition derived through logical reasoning." [14] Meditation was widely used in ancient European and Asian scholarship and religion to focus the mind and thus bring it into a state conducive to reflection. In their research, cognitive psychologists Lorena Colato and Dominique Lippelt of Leiden University found that short periods of meditation had a lasting effect on the brain's imagination.

There are many studies that show that "mindfulness" meditation can improve the quality of teaching and learning. In the study on the effect of meditation on learning, the researcher examined the effect of meditation on learning in OS class through data analysis, and the results showed that after controlling for gender and the overall grade in the introductory class, Principles of Computer Composition, the grade level was a significant predictor of the overall grade in OS, and the 2016 grade was better than the 2015 grade. And this phenomenon did not occur in Model 2. This indicates that positive meditation training helps to enhance the learning effect of the course. [15]

In order to promote imagination, teachers can suggest a broad keyword to students during instruction, such as "joy", "hidden", "environment", and "classical", etc., and arrange for students to consider how to create relevant photography through a meditation of about 5-10 minutes. Alternatively, we can replace these key words by giving students a piece of music, listening to a verse or watching a dance. Through such a meditation process, students are often able to better use their imagination and gain a wealth of inspiration for their photography.

Sketching is also a great way to stimulate students' imaginations. When doing a photography project, have the students try to sketch out the photographic target image using a brief drawing style. This is not meant to be a one-time success, but rather a way to get students to think about and explore different ways of expressing themselves. Often, students will generate more ideas as they draw. When critiquing the sketches, students can be guided and not stuck with reality, and encouraged to translate the characteristics of the time, ethnicity, personality, fun, metaphor, etc. into the picture through their imagination and add the creative sketches. With sketches, the work will have a direction and teachers will be able to give

technical support to students more easily.

#### 4. Improve the Ability of Scenography in Teaching

In modern photography teaching, many teachers and students pay special attention to the planning, shooting, and post-production aspects of photography creation, but often do not give enough attention to scenography. The high demand for technical skills in fictional art photography is due to the complexity, longevity, and collaborative nature of its creation. Technical skills are reflected in all aspects of fictional photography, but currently it is especially important to strengthen scenography skills in art photography teaching. Although digital post-production techniques are becoming more and more abundant, the ability to set the scene remains the foundation of the entire photographic image. According to Alexandre Sokourov, "the point of using digital effects extensively is not to fundamentally change the set of a real production, as the script already depicts the visual space and atmosphere. This technology is intended to update, at least partially, the static or dynamic set." [16]

Many famous artists spend a great deal of time and effort in fictional art photography sets, because the success of the set is directly related to the success or failure of the creation. Excellent set work enhances the artistic expression of the work. Gregory Crewdson, chair of the photography department at Yale University's School of Art, is very good at setting. His work is of outstanding artistic level, and each image seems to hide a quiet, strange and mysterious story, giving the viewer rich imagination. In the creation of his work "Twilight", he uses professional sets similar to those used for film shoots. He sometimes invites up to about 40 crew members to set up the scene. He often uses props from the real life of the town, and he will set up the streets of the town very cold and full of gloomy feeling. On some shoots, he builds houses in large studios, which is a lot of work and requires a lot of labor and money. This often cannot be imitated in teaching because schools and students often cannot pay for the huge set-up costs. Students need to use their ingenuity and use simple, inexpensive methods to achieve the best set possible.

In modern China, there are artists who are adept at reflecting traditional Chinese aesthetics in the sets of art photography. These artists' approaches are worth learning and studying in our teaching. Ma Liang is an artist who is good at scenography and making props and installations. He has lived in Shanghai since he was a child, his father was a national director of the Shanghai Opera House and his mother was a famous actress. He was often exposed to theater and scenery from his childhood. He used fine scenic techniques in his photographic work "Secondhand Tang Poetry". In a sandbox on a table, a background full of classical Chinese landscape aesthetics and environment was created. He uses elements and scenarios from the Tang poems and incorporates his new ideas into the set. His sets,

coupled with metaphorical props, give the photographic images a bleak, desolate mood. In the whole creation, the proportion of set work accounts for the majority of the components, while the comparison of shooting and post-production is relatively small. In Ma Liang's photographic works such as "My Mobile Photo Studio", "Portrait of Mephistopheles", "Journey to the West" and "What is Love", we can also see his emphasis on the traditional aesthetic expression in the scenery. It is suggested to add an introduction to these photographic works of art in the course.

Set work requires extensive collection of materials, such as historical photographs, books, picture books, and films to extract the effects or elements of the set. Web-based databases and film libraries are available in most school libraries. With the planning of a set, space is needed to make it happen. However, due to the limitations of the school's teaching space, students often cannot find a particularly satisfactory space within the school, which requires borrowing or renting a suitable location outside the school for filming. Set-up work also requires strong hands-on skills and the ability to modify props and decorations. Most of the time, the set requires materials that need to be reworked by your own hands. Some good artists, often able to turn waste into treasure, some inexpensive second-hand items cleverly used in the set, spending a small amount of money to achieve a good visual effect.

## 5. Conclusion

Fictional art photography has very free artistic expression possibilities, but such freedom is difficult to produce outstanding art photography works if it is not supported by excellent artistic concepts and technical skills. The core of artistic photography creation lies in the creative imagination of the creator, which promotes artistic innovation. Technical ability is the foundation of artistic photography creation, and without a solid foundation, excellent creativity cannot be implemented. The ability to set a scene is a very important aspect of artistic photography skills and should be given sufficient attention by teachers in their teaching. There is still much space for development in the teaching of fictional art photography in China, and I believe that in the near future we will see more excellent fictional art photography and young photographic artists using fictional photographic methods in art galleries and online media.

## References

- [1] Zheng. "What's wrong with China's higher photography education - from the perspective of humanities." *Chinese Photographer*. 09 (2010): 52-53.
- [2] Liu Xiaoxia. "An analysis of the philosophy of photography education in foreign universities." *Chinese Photographer*. 09 (2022): 40-45.
- [3] Ji Weige. "From the change of photography education to see the new momentum of discipline (professional) construction new opportunities." *Chinese Photographer*. 09 (2021): 42-45.
- [4] Wang Shuai. "The same but different - observation and reflection on the current situation of higher photography education." *Journal of Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts*. 06 (2020): 105-108.
- [5] Yuval Heraly, translated by Lin Hua. "Yuval Hurali: New technologies are used to make heaven or build hell, it all depends on how we choose." *World Culture*. 07 (2022): 44-47.
- [6] Lu, Mingjun. "The construction of reality in images: post-medium, fiction and non-fiction." *Nanjing Social Science*. 03 (2020): 118-123.
- [7] Li Shufeng, Nan Wuweiwei, and Yang Lijun. "2019 Annual Research Report on the Development of Photographic Art." *Chinese Photographer*. 05 (2020): 84-93.
- [8] Yang Xiaoguang, Zhong Fenghong. Reflections on photography art education [J]. *Literary Arts Research*, 2001 (01): 135-136.
- [9] [French] André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, translated by Yuan Junsheng, Beijing: Beijing United Publishing Company, 2020, p. 30.
- [10] MAGEE C. The age of imagination: coming soon to a civilization near you [C]// Second international symposium: national security and national competitiveness: open source solutions (Vol. 1), Washington DC: Shoreham, 1993: 95-98.
- [11] Qu, Ting. "Zhang Xiaoling: Works that lack imagination and creativity cannot enter the contemporary value system." *Art Market*. 02 (2019): 34-35.
- [12] Lv Fengxian. Image generation and transformation in digital photography—an experiment in teaching photography to art and design majors [J]. *Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts (Art and Design)*, 2019 (06): 147-152.
- [13] Kabat-Zinn. Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Con-text: Past, Present, and Future [J]. *Clinical Psychology, Science and Practice* Volume 10, 2003 (2): 144-156.
- [14] Cui Donghong, Brain science basis of meditation, *Psychology Letters*. Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine Affiliated Mental Health Center, Shanghai Key Laboratory of Serious Psychiatric Disorders, 2021, 4 (04).
- [15] Li X. R., Xing Y. L., and Wang X. H. "An empirical study on the effect of positive meditation training on undergraduate students' classroom learning outcomes." *Journal of Beihua Institute of Aerospace Technology* 32. 01 (2022): 13-15.
- [16] Alexandre Sokourov, Y. Cao, Y. Translation. New technologies and trends in scenography [J]. *World Cinema*, 2011 (06): 160-164.