LIMINAL MIND
Research Notes Series

The Education of an Eye

Birmingham Polytechnic School of Photography, 1977–1980 — and what it took fifty years to learn

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> *I wish I had known enough to ask the right questions. The failure was not that I did not pay attention. It was that I had not been given the world the questions belonged to. You cannot ask after a thing you do not know is there.*

I. The Shire

I grew up in Llantwit Major, in the Vale of Glamorgan, and for a long time I described that as an advantage. It was safe. It was quiet. It was, in the way of such places, sufficient. We learned to read and write, and that was held to be enough, because the world was assumed to be elsewhere and assumed to be benign. I have come to think of it as Hobbiton. We were the hobbits: protected, well-fed, incurious by design, living in a green bowl two days' walk from a danger we had never been told existed.

The Shire is not a stupid place. It is an unprepared one, and it does not know that it is unprepared, because the not-knowing is the whole arrangement. The education I was given was real and it was also a kind of poverty — an absence dressed as protection. It kept me from harm and it kept me from knowledge, and I now believe those were the same act. When I left at eighteen with a Nikon F, a 28mm and a 50mm, and a copy of Creative Camera, I thought I was well equipped. I was equipped for the wrong world. I was about to walk out of Hobbiton and into the actual one, and I had no map, and worse, I did not know that a map was a thing a person could need.

This essay was written once before, in the spring, and that version told a confident story: that I arrived ahead of my institution, saw clearly, and was proved right. I no longer believe it. What follows is the correction — not because the first account was a lie, but because I had not yet found out what I had been standing next to.

II. The Schism, and Why Being Right Was the Smallest Thing

The year I arrived, British photographic education was in the middle of a rupture. The vocational tradition — oriented toward commercial studios, forensics, advertising — was losing its grip, and a fine-art revolution was arriving through Creative Camera, through the New Topographics, through the work being done at Trent Polytechnic under Paul Hill and Raymond Moore. The argument was that the idea mattered more than the sharpness of the print. The school had not yet received the news.

The curriculum was built around technical mastery: the Scheimpflug principle on large format, developer chemistry, the Zone System, the Weston Master meter. I read this as orthodoxy and I set myself against it. I was reading Walker Evans in the September 1977 issue, the month I arrived; I thought the institution was behind the times, and on the narrow question of curriculum I was not wrong. Within a decade the approach was superseded, photography moved into the art departments, and the theory side won.

Here is what I have only now understood: being right about that was the smallest and least important thing that happened to me in those three years. The technical critique was correct and trivial. While I was busy winning an argument about whether the idea mattered more than the print, I was failing to notice that the room I was arguing in contained people whose lives were the very thing photography is for. My rightness made me arrogant, and the arrogance was a kind of blindness. I had found something to be superior about, and superiority is an excellent way of not seeing.

III. The Men I Could Not Read

I dismissed the technical staff as the old guard. They were, I thought, figures of a superseded orthodoxy — men who taught the Sinar and the Zone System and had not understood where the medium was going. That is the whole of what I saw at the time. Fifty years later, in a conversation among the surviving cohort, one of us — Jean-Louis Grégoire, who had the patience and the curiosity I lacked — surfaced who those men actually were.

Tim Harris had flown photographic reconnaissance in Hurricanes, largely at night, with three downed German bombers to his name. Terry Butler had been merchant navy; his ship was sunk by a U-boat, he survived a second attack, and limped into an Irish harbour. T. Hanywell had been a desert rat at El Alamein. Ramon Closa was a political refugee from Franco's Spain, condemned to death in his own country, who could return only after the 1977 amnesty. These were the men I had filed under "behind the times."

Consider the particular cruelty of it. The man teaching me — Harris — had photographed for survival, at night, over occupied Europe, where a failed exposure could cost lives and a successful one could end them. The photograph as the friction-mark of history pressed

into a human being is the entire subject of the work I have spent my later life making. It was standing at the front of the class in 1978, in a man I found tedious. I did not ask him a single real question. I could not, because I did not know there was anything to ask. That generation did not volunteer their histories — they had built a wall of silence around the dangerous world they had seen — and a boy from the Shire had no idea the wall was even there, let alone what it held.

They are all dead now. The questions are gone with them. What I have is a secondhand account, surfaced half a century too late.

IV. Two Miles, and the Wrong Direction

I have to correct a fact I got wrong in the first version, because the correction is the point. The school was not in Handsworth. The Dorrington Road campus was in Great Barr — a quiet, almost entirely white suburb. I lived in Handsworth, about two miles away, which in 1977 was West Indian, loud, alive, a community built by the families who had settled around Soho Road and Handsworth Park across the previous two decades. The school was an island of suburban quiet set down in the white Midlands. Handsworth was the opposite of an island: porous, connected by a thousand threads to the Caribbean and to the whole history of empire and migration that had brought it into being. I commuted daily between the two, and I took the island for the place of learning.

I remember Handsworth in the body before the mind. The shops on the way — the smell of unfamiliar fruit, the smell of dried fish. The evenings in the Crompton Arms. The Asian shopkeepers. The large shared house, and my friend Steve Morley papering the walls of the top flat in giant Benson & Hedges billposters — the slick surreal commercial image of that campaign, pasted over a house in the middle of the most image-rich place I would ever live. I treated the billposters as décor and the community as backdrop. The constructed image was on my walls; the real one was out the front door, and I had the focal lengths confused.

And I remember the children in the street — white kids and Black kids playing together, easily, in a city and a decade where the adult world was working hard to keep that line drawn, with the National Front, the sus laws, and the disturbances of 1981 and 1985 still to come. That was one of the defining photographs of the period and it was making itself in front of me, daily, for free. I had the camera. I had an eye in training. I did not lift it, because I did not yet understand that this was the picture. The school had taught me to capture the image and had its back turned to the thing images are for. Two miles, and it faced the wrong way — and so, mostly, did I.

I want to be careful here, because there is a dishonest version of this paragraph in which Handsworth exists to educate me, a sensitive young man, and its people are reduced to texture for my formation. That is exactly the error I am confessing, and I will not commit it again to describe it. Handsworth owed my eye nothing. It was a place of people living their lives. The indictment is wholly mine: that I moved through it for the better part of two years and did not see what I was inside, and that I can only now count what I failed to record.

V. The Luxury of Not Knowing

I have to be honest about the particular shape of my ignorance, because the first version of this essay turned it into a virtue. I claimed there that my naivety produced honesty — that being green and curious made the work true. I no longer think that is quite right, and the part that is wrong is important. There is a kind of not-knowing that is a luxury, and I had it. I was a white boy from a safe corner of the Vale who had moved from progressive rock to punk in the space of a year, switched-on about music and empty about almost everything else — politics, history, the actual weather of the world. The emptiness felt like freedom. It was freedom: the freedom of someone the world had not yet required to understand it.

That is the thing the Shire gives and does not name. Knowledge is not distributed evenly, and neither is the permission to do without it. Some people are allowed to remain children well into adulthood, carrying their ignorance lightly, and some are not — the difference set not by temperament or intelligence but by what the world demands of you in order to live in it. I moved through Handsworth and through that staffroom in the easy ignorance of someone who had never been made to know better. The honesty I once credited to my naivety was, at least in part, just the obliviousness of the protected. I do not say this to flog myself. I say it because the alternative — calling that obliviousness a gift — is the flattering lie I am trying to stop telling.

VI. What the Technical Education Did Give

None of this means the school gave me nothing. The Sinar discipline — the slow photography, the deliberate construction of the frame, the pre-visualisation the Zone System demands — installed itself as unconscious competence. Light is legible to me in a way that training made automatic, and I do not regret an hour of it. Technical mastery is a moving target: the developer formulae and the large-format movements are obsolete, but the understanding of light and tone and how a subject occupies a frame did not move. Content is king, and technique is its servant.

But I will not let that be the moral any longer, because making it the moral was how the first version let me off. The durable lesson of the technical education was real. It was also, set beside the men who taught it and the streets I walked to reach it, almost nothing. I learned to expose film correctly in the same building where I failed to ask a reconnaissance pilot what he had seen. The competence was genuine. The proportion was obscene.

VII. The Cohort, and the Archive That Resulted

We were, it is true, a gathering of outsiders. Orde Eliason had come from Namibia via Cape Town — his childhood nickname was Die Weglooper, the one who wanders. Jean-Louis Grégoire arrived from Paris; Apostolis Tzallas from Greece; Mario Paiva from Brazil; Chris Nissen from Norway; Hosni from Iran; Jacek Barucki from Poland; Robert Twigg, later David Bailey's assistant; Nigel van Beek from Cleethorpes. Nobody had the home advantage, and the friendship that forms in those conditions is chosen rather than inherited, tested by shared strangeness. The conversations among us were an education the curriculum could not give.

And the work did happen. The 28mm on Handsworth streets became, over the following decade, the eye that found Mario Vargas Llosa with the weight of a literary history in his face, that caught Miranda Richardson laughing as a pigeon left her hand, that sat in Robbie Coltrane's basement with last night's curry on the table. The Handsworth negatives themselves are a document of a Birmingham moment now firmly historical — Soho Road and Handsworth Park before the disturbances, made by an outsider with no cultural map. They sit, undigitised, in a shipping container near Llantwit Major, waiting. Orde's parallel archive of the same city, from a different position, is now held at the Library of Birmingham; mine is the outsider's eye to his insider's, and I have come to feel the weight of that asymmetry differently than I once did.

I record all of this not to rescue the redemption story — the cohort was ahead of the curriculum, the streets taught attention, and so on — but because it is true, and because the point of the essay is not that nothing of value happened. The point is that the most valuable things were the ones I could not see at the time, and that the seeing has arrived fifty years late.

VIII. The Education Is the Looking Back

The title of this essay is a deception until the essay admits the following. The eye was not educated in Birmingham. It was green, sent out from a safe bubble that had taught it to read and write and called that sufficient, and it walked into a world — of veterans'

silences, of a community carrying empire on its back, of histories I had no equipment to read. The education of that eye is happening now, in 2026, as the cohort surfaces what was always there, as the names come back, as Jean-Louis works his patient magic on the histories of dead men.

That is what an education is, I have decided. Not the transfer of technique. The slow, late arrival of the understanding of what you were standing in the middle of — arriving, by its nature, too late to act on. I left a white bubble in the Vale, failed to read the multicultural world I was handed, and have returned, fifty years on, to another nearly all-white corner of the same coast, doing the work of preservation and recovery that my whole practice has become — having finally learned how to see the thing I could not see when it was in front of me. The eye came good in the wrong place, at the wrong time, twice over.

The deepest lesson the Vale ever taught me was the one it never meant to teach: how much it had left out. I wish I had known enough to ask. I am asking now, of people who are dying, across a fifty-year distance, in the only direction left open — backwards. It will have to be enough, because it is what there is.

Note on Sources and Method

This is the second version of a research note first drafted in April 2026. The author attended Birmingham Polytechnic School of Photography at the Dorrington Road campus, Great Barr, between September 1977 and the summer of 1980, and lived during that period in Handsworth, approximately two miles away. The revisions in this version draw substantially on recollections surfaced in 2026 by surviving members of the cohort — in particular the wartime and political histories of the teaching staff, recovered by Jean-Louis Grégoire, and corrections of fact (including the location of the campus) offered by Nigel van Beek and others. Photographs from this period are held undigitised in the author's archive near Llantwit Major, Vale of Glamorgan; digitisation begins June 2026. Names and details given here are reconstructed from personal testimony at fifty years' remove and are offered as such — the unreliability of the looking-back is part of the essay's subject, not incidental to it.