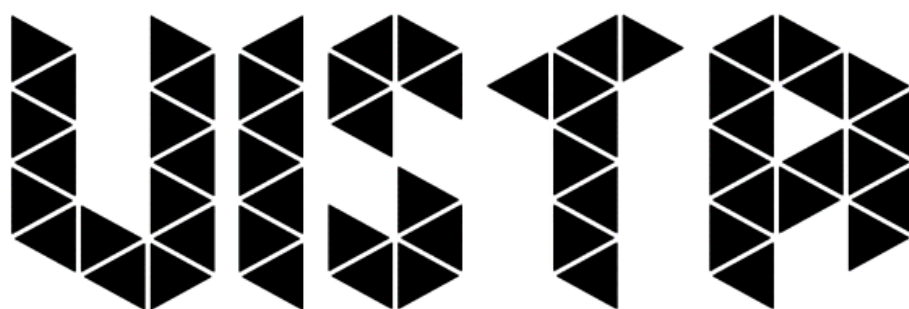




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“We Are Being Taught How to See”: Interpretations and Enskillment of Photographic Vision in Educational Context

“Estão a Ensinar-nos a Ver”: Interpretações e Aquisição de Competências do Olhar Fotográfico em Contextos Educativos

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“WE ARE BEING TAUGHT HOW TO SEE”: INTERPRETATIONS AND ENSKILLMENT OF PHOTOGRAPHIC VISION IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how “skilled vision” is interpreted and cultivated in professional photography education. Drawing on interviews with teachers, focus group discussions with students, and analysis of curricula from three photography schools in Russia and Sweden, it explores how photographic seeing is conceptualised, trained and learned across distinct institutional and cultural contexts. Combining frameworks of professionalism and practical knowledge, the article examines enskillment of vision through three analytically distinguishable dimensions emphasised in the programmes: “knowledgeable vision”, “ethical and critical vision”, and “creative vision”. Broad cultural knowledge and visual erudition (*nasmotrennost’* in Russian) form the foundation, while a critically and ethically attuned worldview further shapes professional seeing. Together, these dimensions enable rapid, context-sensitive “seeing-in-action” during image production, developed through practice that replicates the pressures of real-world photographic work.

KEYWORDS

photographic seeing, photography education, practical knowledge, professionalism, skilled vision

“ESTÃO A ENSINAR-NOS A VER”: INTERPRETAÇÕES E AQUISIÇÃO DE COMPETÊNCIAS DO OLHAR FOTOGRAFICO EM CONTEXTOS EDUCATIVOS

RESUMO

Este artigo explora de que forma o “olhar especializado” é interpretado e desenvolvido no ensino profissional de fotografia. Com base em entrevistas com docentes, discussões em grupos focais com estudantes e análise dos planos curriculares de três escolas de fotografia na Rússia e na Suécia, o artigo analisa de que forma o olhar fotográfico é concetualizado, treinado e desenvolvido em distintos contextos institucionais e culturais. Combinando os referenciais do profissionalismo e do conhecimento prático, o artigo examina o desenvolvimento das competências do olhar através de três dimensões analiticamente distinguíveis, destacadas nos programas: “olhar informado”, “olhar ético e crítico” e “olhar criativo”. Um conhecimento cultural amplo e uma erudição visual (*nasmotrennost’*, em russo) constituem a base, enquanto uma perspectiva crítica do mundo e eticamente orientada molda o olhar profissional. Em conjunto, estas dimensões permitem um “olhar em ação” rápido e sensível ao contexto durante a produção de imagens, desenvolvido através de uma prática que reproduz as exigências do trabalho fotográfico no mundo real.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

olhar fotográfico, ensino da fotografia, conhecimento prático, profissionalismo, olhar especializado

With fingers dream-soft, rarified,
 He touched the wellsprings of my sight.
 Oracular my orbs grew wide,
 Like eagle eyes that glare in fright.
 —Alexander Pushkin, "Prophet"

INTRODUCTION

Previous research highlights a crucial foundation of professional photographic practice — "seeing photographically" (McQuire et al., 2024). McQuire et al. (2024) define it as a "mode of *envisioning* the world as a series of photographs: it is the practical skill of imagining what a scene would look like if it was photographed" (p. 14). Similarly, Gough-Brady (2021) talks of an in-learned skill of looking¹ in documentary filming — the simultaneous "translation" of what is seen in the camera-finder to what will be seen on the screen.

Yet this professional skill involves more than imagining the world as an image, or a series of images. Trained "in the company of ever-shifting machine-cultural assemblages" (McQuire et al., 2024, p. 14), photographic seeing requires knowledge of, and a critical meta-perspective on, both the world and the photographic practice itself. According to Lehmuskallio (2019), skilled vision is "an enskillment into communities of practice, and thus into social hierarchies" (p. 19). Mäenpää (2022) applies Grasseni's (2004) concept of "skilled vision" to news photo professionals, arguing that trained vision is "central to determining the practitioners' capacity to adhere to the professional standards of the field" (Mäenpää, 2022, p. 240) and is best understood as "a manifestation of professional knowledge that involves a variety of practical skills" (p. 238).

Azoulay (2008) speaks of "critical watching", and Bengtsson Lundin (2021) of the in-learned critical "civil gaze" as necessary skills for professional photographers, implying a critical meta-perspective on the social context in which the photograph is taken. Frosh (2024) adds a time dimension to this meta-perspective, suggesting that seeing photographically is an act of cultural memory. Since a professional photographer is expected to provide consistent, constant and reliable delivery of many quality photographs (Schmieder, 2016), "photographic seeing" is also instrumental: it implies an ability to meet specific expectations of a specific "client" (e.g., photo-editor in a newsroom; see Thomson, 2018).

¹ Favero and Lehmuskallio (2025) and Lehmuskallio (2019) distinguish between seeing as a passive act and looking as an active, intentional directing of attention to seeing someone or something. Berger (1972) puts it succinctly: "we only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice" (p. 8). At the same time, as Berger (1972) notes, "every image embodies a way of seeing" (p. 10). Favero and Lehmuskallio (2025) emphasise that "seeing is intimately tied to cultural forms of attention and skilled ways of seeing" (p. 7), meaning that modes of seeing depend on knowledge and skills, can be learned, and can be reflected upon. As formulated by photographer and photography lecturer Grant Scott (2020), "we can all look, but we have to learn to see" (para. 7). Thus, both seeing and looking can be active. In this article, I suggest that the enskillment of vision involves not only linking these processes to cognition, evaluation, and performance, but also sustaining a critical meta-perspective on them: looking as the focused directing of the gaze, and seeing both as perceiving the world ("I can see") and as interpreting it ("I see"). I have also ensured that translations of informants' quotations from Russian and Swedish reflect as closely as possible the nuances of "seeing" and "looking" in English.

But how is professional photographic *skilled vision* interpreted by teachers and students within photography programmes? What is the place of *photographic seeing* among other forms of professional knowledge and skills in educational contexts? And what is the relation between the broader cultural and political conditions, these interpretations and their practical application? In this article, I examine how *skilled vision* — encompassing cognition, evaluation (in relation to practices), and performance — is understood and taught in photography education across two distinct geographic, political, and cultural contexts: Sweden and Russia. The empirical material consists of interviews and focus groups with Swedish and Russian students and teachers in professional photography programmes with different specialisations — photojournalism, documentary photography, and, in one case, art photography. In addition, course and programme syllabuses were analysed.

I approach skilled vision and its cultivation through the intersection of two theoretical frameworks: professionalism and practical knowledge. My intention is not to redefine skilled vision as a synonym for professional competence, but rather to examine how photography educators and students understand, describe and engage in the educational processes through which professional photographic seeing is cultivated as the ability to perceive, interpret, and respond to photographic moments in professionally meaningful ways.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SKILLED VISION AS A PRACTICE TO BE LEARNED

In the epigraph, a prophet's — or indeed a poet's — sight is transformed, along with the other senses, by a seraph's touch, enabling him to "sear hearts of men", as Alexander Pushkin wrote in his 1826 poem. *Photographic seeing* also requires transformation: from "ordinary", amateur vision to a professional look shaped by knowledge and skills. Yet unlike the instantaneous change by a seraph's touch, this shift unfolds through professional socialisation, with education playing an important role.

Lehmuskallio (2019) argues that looking is a "skilled practice that must be learned" (p. 8). Favero and Lehmuskallio (2025) emphasise that "the sets of skills that seeing requires are learnt within situated communities of practice, with the aid of material guides (books, models, software, etc.), in interaction within one's environments, all guided by specific ontological understandings of the world" (p. 7). In this article, I view educational contexts as situated communities of practice and examine how the intersections between broader political and cultural conditions and educational environments shape — or are understood to shape — the "skilled vision" of future professional photographers.

Lehmuskallio (2019) notes that "our ways of looking may be captured, seduced, or taken hold of in very particular ways" (p. 10). Yet, an "enskillment into a specific way of looking" (Lehmuskallio, 2019, p. 14; see also Mäenpää, 2022) implies an acquisition of control over where and how visual attention is directed. Vision, as Favero and

Lehmuskallio (2025) remind us, is only one sense among others, and is shaped by them. Moreover, seeing and looking are always historically and geographically situated (Berger, 1972; Lehmuskallio, 2019).

While the focus of Lehmuskallio (2019) and Favero and Lehmuskallio (2025) lies primarily on "the interrelations of images and those looking at them" (p. 7), Mäenpää (2022) concentrates on the practical application of vision in photojournalism, arguing that the "shared vision practised in the field" (p. 251) is essential for acceptance into the community of visual professionals. She also finds that, paradoxically, visual professionals often struggle to articulate what "skilled vision" is or how it is acquired, frequently invoking intuition or bodily sensation. Time pressure further shapes vision: rapid decisions are only possible because years of reflection and interpretive training lie behind them. Mäenpää (2022) identifies four areas in which photojournalists continually train their vision: following the news, using reference images, working with specialised software, and engaging in professional social interaction.

SKILLED VISION IN THE CONTEXT OF PROFESSIONALISM

Newbury (1997) highlights the role of photography education in developing professional identity, emphasising the interaction between the student, technology, and the surrounding social world in which reflective photographic practice, critical of existing power hierarchies, is learned (see also Edge, 2009; McWilliams, 2009). Addressing the gap in research on photography education in the age of de-professionalisation (e.g., Thomson, 2018), I explore how *skilled vision* is understood within educational programmes concerned with photographic professionalism.

As Emmanuel et al. (2021) note, professional education can be seen as "moulding or shaping the future" (p. 105) of a profession and, ideally, improving its quality. The values and skills developed through education thus become a central foundation of professionalism. Waisbord (2013) defines "professionalism" as the capacity of a field "to settle boundaries and avoid intrusion from external actors" (p. 11). Because the programmes included in this study involved both journalistic specialisations and broader photographic orientations (including art photography), I conducted a literature review on professional skills in both photography and journalism.

Although different aspects of professionalism may be prioritised across occupations and contexts (Waisbord, 2013), the literature review revealed numerous shared "indicators" of professionalism across studies of photojournalism and journalism, photography education and practice. I grouped these indicators into three categories — "cognitive", "evaluative", and "performative" (Table 1), drawing inspiration from Hanitzsch (2007). The references provided are illustrative, as values, standards, and skills are discussed widely across the literature on professional competence.

COGNITIVE	EVALUATIVE (IN RELATION TO PRACTICE)	PERFORMATIVE
Professional knowledge — except for tacit knowledge achieved at the newsroom, that is, via professional practice (Nygren, 2016; Waisbord, 2013); and intellectual capacity (Emmanuel et al., 2021).	Values and beliefs (Vine, 2016); taste (Mortensen, 2014); ideals, norms, autonomy (including to define and defend their practices and values — Mortensen, 2014; Waisbord, 2013); standards, ideology, motivations (Nygren & Stigbrand, 2014); critical media literacy and reflexive capacity (Theodosiadou et al., 2021); self-reflexivity (Berezin, 2009); ethics (Ferrucci et al., 2020; Foreman, 2016; Mortensen, 2014); moral consciousness (Maslov, 2014); and motivations, ethics, and epistemologies (Postema & Deuze, 2020).	Character traits and competences (Nygren & Stigbrand, 2014); duties (Nygren, 2016); skills, techniques and quality (Mortensen, 2014; Waisbord 2013); (ethical) practices (Theodosiadou et al., 2021; Waisbord, 2013); production processes (Ferrucci et al., 2020); organisational discipline (Waisbord, 2013); and organisation of labor (Frosh, 2020).

Table 1. Common indicators of professionalism in research on photography and (photo)journalism

SKILLED VISION IN THE CONTEXT OF PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

Favero and Lehmuskallio (2025) note that in the Western cultural tradition — to which both Sweden and, with some reservations, Russia belong — seeing and looking are strongly associated with knowledge and memory. This leads me to situate *skilled vision* within the broader concept of “practical knowledge”. Summarised by Schwarz (2019), practical knowledge can be understood as “a form of immediate action, where the knowledgeable individual possesses the ability to act appropriately in a given situation without needing to pause and reflect on what should be done and how it should be done” (p. 117). It is an “individually attained proficiency” (Svenaeus, 2009, p. 13), contextual and intuitively practiced (cf. Mäenpää, 2022).

Research on practical knowledge (Burman, 2009) often distinguishes between *episteme* (factual knowledge and general principles), *techne* (skills developed through practice), and *phronesis* (the moral and situational judgment that emerges from action, reflection, and experience). *Phronesis* is also understood as “a kind of morally pervaded practical wisdom” and “addresses the particularity of things and situations; it addresses their distinctive conditions so that someone could decide how to move in a morally framed direction” (Eisner, 2002, p. 381).

I suggest that students and educators understand professional photography as a form of practical knowledge. Their education thus becomes a form of pragmatist *bildning* — learning through reflective experience (Burman, 2009) — in which the ability to perceive connections, understand oneself and others, and develop a meta-perspective on one’s knowledge and learning processes is cultivated. These capacities, in turn, provide the foundation for seeing and looking “photographically” in their professional futures.

This study examines how the commonly identified foundations of professionalism — cognition, evaluation, and performance — are translated into the specific domain of photographic seeing. *Episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis* in research on practical knowledge resemble familiar educational distinctions between knowledge, skill and judgment (sometimes described as “head, hand, and heart”), although they should not be understood as direct equivalents of Aristotelian categories. While these concepts are analytically distinct, professional practice typically involves their integration. In photography

education, *episteme* relates to theoretical, cultural, and visual knowledge; *techne* — applied skills for image production and creative practice; and *phronesis* enables situational context-sensitive judgment regarding what should be noticed and seen, how situations should be interpreted, and how one ought to act in particular circumstances.

Bringing these frameworks together, I propose that the three analytical dimensions — cognitive ("head", knowledge, *episteme*), evaluative ("heart", ethical and moral judgment, closely linked to *phronesis*), and performative ("hand", skills developed through practice, *techne*) — help explain how future photographers and photography educators interpret and cultivate *skilled vision* as part of professional competence across different photographic fields, including photojournalism, documentary, and art photography, and in the context of practical knowledge.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Previous research has examined educational programmes in the very different contexts of Sweden and Russia. For example, Nygren and Stigbrand (2014), focusing on journalism education in these countries, show that while many similarities exist, clear differences in students' professional identities can be explained by national conditions and prevailing media systems. Including two such distinct countries in this study makes it possible to contextualise interpretations of *photographic seeing*, as education always develops within a macro-social environment (Burman, 2014), and at the same time highlight the universal tendencies.

The initial focus on photojournalism education expanded to include documentary photography and, in one case, more artistic forms of photography, due to shifts within the programmes themselves (see also Åker, 2023) and, in general, blurring boundaries between the different professional fields related to photography (e.g., Mäenpää, 2023). However, the empirical material excludes programmes oriented toward related areas such as moving images (video, television journalism, documentary filmmaking) and art practices beyond photography.

The study includes three educational institutions with distinct professional orientations. The Photojournalism and Media Technologies Department at the Faculty of Journalism, Moscow State University (MSU) offers two programmes in photojournalism: a four-year full-time bachelor's degree and a one-year professional preparation programme designed for students who already hold a higher education degree. In the bachelor's programme, the first two years consist of general courses required of all journalism students — such as Philosophy, Sociology, Basics of Journalism, Professional Journalism Ethics, and an internship. Specialisation in Photojournalism begins in the third year. It includes courses such as History of Photojournalism, Photography in Mass Media, Contemporary Mediastory, as well as technical courses like Techniques and Technology of Digital Photography, Photocomposition and Photo-editing, and Digital Image Processing. The one-year professional preparation programme is almost exclusively devoted to

photography-related subjects, including Photography in Mass Media, Photo Editing, Photo Composition, History of Domestic and International Photography, Photoreportage and Its Problems, Multimedia Technologies in Contemporary Photojournalism, and Legal Foundations of Media. Both programmes conclude with an examination project, which may take the form of a photojournalistic project with a written report, or a traditional thesis.

The Rodchenko Moscow School (RMS) of Photography and Multimedia provides an artistic environment in which aspiring photographers explore diverse visual art forms. It offers a three-year full-time programme, Art of Photography and Multimedia, classified as "additional education" and not leading to an official certificate. During the research period, the school had three photography groups, each led by an experienced photographer: Project Photography, Straight Photography, and Documentary Photography. Each semester, students select at least five theoretical or practical courses. Theoretical subjects include, for example, History of Photography, Problems of Perceiving Artistic Forms, and History and Theory of Art. Practical courses include Techniques and Technologies of Visual Arts, Studio Photography, Image Processing, Photobook Layout and Design, and Art and Science. Examination projects are presented in a group exhibition at a Moscow exhibition venue.

The Nordic Photography School (NPS) at Biskops Arnö, located north of Stockholm, trains photographers for an evolving media market. It offers a three-year full-time programme, Professional Photographer – Photography and Moving Image. Developed in collaboration with the media industry, the programme emphasises vocational training. Courses include Camera Technology, Image Editing, Light, Photojournalistic Storytelling, Journalistic Work (including ethics), Genre Photography, Magazine Layout, Moving Image and Sound, and Photography as a Profession (covering self-marketing and management). The programme also includes a longer internship and ends with an examination project, presented either as a photojournalistic reportage or as part of an exhibition.

According to Favero and Lehmuskallio (2025), shared ways of seeing, knowing, and "moulding" reality are developed through interactions within communities of practice (also see Grasseni, 2004). They further argue that

skilled vision cannot be studied by looking at images alone. Rather, it calls for participant observation (and other participatory methods), interviews, visual and sensory techniques, and other qualitative methods for data collection, given that the social relationships intrinsic to seeing are not deducible from images alone. (Favero & Lehmuskallio, 2025, p. 76)

Accordingly, the enskillment of vision can be investigated through participants' accounts of practice, educational interaction and institutional settings. Rather than treating photographic seeing as a stable professional competence, this study examines the ongoing process of enskillment of vision as it is articulated, negotiated, and cultivated within educational environments.

Following this methodological premise, the study combines interviews, focus group discussions, and curriculum analysis to examine how photography educators and students describe the cultivation of professional photographic seeing. I observed selected educational and examination activities at the three photography schools, including final exhibitions by RMS and NPS students. In this article, however, these observations are used only as contextual background rather than as empirical material.

The author conducted five face-to-face focus groups with MSU students (two) and RMS students (three), as well as individual interviews with educators (six in MSU and five in RMS) in 2018–2019. In 2020, together with a project colleague, the author carried out three face-to-face focus groups at NPS — one with *alumni* and two with current students — and three individual interviews with NPS educators, along with an online interview with an NPS *alumna*. Focus groups ranged from three to nine participants. Interviews and focus groups in Russia were conducted in Russian (except for two interviews in English), while those in Sweden were conducted in Swedish. Participants (and their instructors) were informed about the project's aims, main questions, and data handling procedures. All names in the analysis section are pseudonyms.

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours, and focus groups between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. Both were semi-structured and centred on themes such as the professional photographer's role in society, fields of photographic practice, distinctions between professionals and amateurs, relationships with viewers, the future of photography, and the role and relevance of educational programmes in an evolving media landscape. This article focuses specifically on students' and educators' perspectives on *skilled vision* within the broader constellation of professional skills and practical knowledge, and on the role of education in enskillment of vision. All interview and focus group material was transcribed, translated into English, and analysed using thematic analysis (Dusi & Stevens, 2023).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

From the perspective of practical knowledge, photography is a paradoxical profession. On the one hand, students in all three programmes are expected to take pictures — to engage in practice — already from day one. As RMS teacher Egor (personal communication, April 3, 2019) put it, "the school does not give you a profession. You don't need to study anything to work as a photographer. You need to go — and take pictures". On the other hand, students themselves, like MSU student Snezhana (personal communication, April 13, 2019), believe that "you need to study to get any profession". Snezhana and her groupmate Alena emphasised what they particularly appreciate in their education: "we are being taught how to see" (Snezhana, personal communication, April 13, 2019), "to see, to think, to react" (Alena, personal communication, April 13, 2019).

This exchange encapsulates the intertwining of the cognitive, evaluative, and performative dimensions of practical knowledge — or *episteme*, *phronesis*, and *techné* — that

characterise learning through reflective experience. In this section, I examine this triad with photographic seeing at its core and focus on three analytically distinguishable dimensions through which participants describe the cultivation of professional photographic seeing: "knowledgeable vision", "ethical and critical vision", and "creative vision". Knowledgeable vision draws primarily on forms of *episteme*; ethical and critical vision reflects *phronetic* judgment; and creative vision is closely connected to *techné*. Skilled vision itself, as interpreted by students and educators, emerges through the interaction of these dimensions in practice, enabling photographers to respond rapidly and appropriately to particular situations. Rather than constituting a new theoretical model, these dimensions serve as analytical lenses that help unpack students' and educators' interpretation of skilled vision and connect it to the forms of cognition, evaluation, and performance cultivated through and highlighted in specific educational processes.

"KNOWLEDGEABLE VISION": SEEING THROUGH THE PRISM OF VISUAL ERUDITION

MSU teacher Viktor (personal communication, April 13, 2019) explains that his goal is not to teach students "how to take photos", but to show them "how *difficult* it is to take a good photo in the modern world". This difficulty is not primarily technical but lies in cultivating something hard to articulate — an attunement of the "inner sense" that only visual professionals develop (cf. Mäenpää, 2022). As RMS student Elena (personal communication, April 3, 2019) puts it,

what makes one a [professional] photographer in a lyrical sense is an *inner sense*, a sense of the things that are happening, taste. These things are in-born. The school helps you find those talents that you came here with and develop them. All of the subjects that we study help us "open up", but they do not make us photographers.

In other words, although students are expected to arrive with some form of photographic "inner sense", their vision — if it is to become a skilled, professional photographic vision — must be developed through knowledge and practice.

NPS teacher Carina (personal communication, September 27, 2019) emphasises the importance of practice, noting that their education is about "learning by doing rather than doing by reading". Nevertheless, across all three programmes, a broad knowledge of art and photography history — and general erudition — is considered a foundational element of photographic professionalism. However, it is given different emphasis and articulated in different ways across the Russian and Swedish contexts. In Russian, there is a term that captures professional visual experience, encompassing both knowledge of and the ability to understand others' images. Rarely used outside the visual professions, this term — *nasmotrennost'* — serves as a visual analogue to *nachitannost'*, literary erudition. RMS student Valentina (personal communication, April 3, 2019) explains: "it is important to understand what was done before you. To nurture yourself. We are unique,

we have our own vision, but visual experience [*nasmotrennost'*] is important — not just in photography, but in art overall. [You need to] develop your taste".

Similarly, MSU teacher Fedor (personal communication, April 15, 2019) argues that "before you become a photographer, you must explore art history, sculpture history, and understand your place within it. You must know this to avoid trying to reinvent the wheel". MSU teacher Viktor (personal communication, April 13, 2019) views photography as part of broader culture. It suggests that a professional photographer should have wide-ranging knowledge across disciplines to master the photographic "language", which includes an ability to think in terms of series of photos rather than single images (McQuire et al., 2024; Schmieder, 2016). Viktor continues by saying:

contemporary photography is the language of symbols, signs, metaphors, generalisations, types. First and foremost, it is the language of literature, music, art, philosophy, logic. This is very important. If a person is trying to take a *series of photos* or to talk with a viewer through photography, all of the aforementioned is necessary. Plus, knowledge of several languages, the basics of law, and psychology. (...) What matters most to me is being able to take *smart* photos and being eager to do so. This is how I see the top level of professional photography.

RMS teacher Leonid (personal communication, March 28, 2019) believes that students attend photography schools because of the environment and visual cultivation (cf. Burman, 2009). RMS student Daniil (personal communication, April 2, 2019) describes professional development as "consisting of several blocks — technical skills, general erudition, history of photography, and general knowledge about the world". A similar emphasis on the importance of art and cultural knowledge, and training the eye through "all-round knowledge", is shared by RMS student Bogdan (personal communication, April 2, 2019):

it is possible to cultivate the visual language and the perception of the visual. (...) Goldin went to an art school. There are a lot of those who attended schools that were not related to photography but... The visual language in the 1970s and now mostly consists of other things apart from the history of photography.

Thus, intellectual capacity (Emmanuel et al., 2021) and professional knowledge (Nygren, 2016; Waisbord, 2013) are viewed by these educators and students as key cognitive indicators of professionalism. Yet, reflecting the increasingly blurred boundaries between photographic fields (e.g., Frosh, 2020; Mäenpää, 2023; Postema & Deuze, 2020), they argue that visual experience must extend beyond the narrow domains of journalism, photography, and art. Professional knowledge that becomes a ground for "skilled vision" is thus a floating signifier that incorporates knowledge and experiences from intersecting

disciplines — something students expect their educational programmes to grant them access to.

Visual erudition is closely tied to the ability to use visual intertextuality (Ilan, 2014) or intervisuality (Mirzoeff, 2002) in one's own photographic practice. All three educational programmes include courses, course modules or classes in the history of photography. At MSU, several compulsory courses cover the history of Russian photography and photojournalism as well as international photography, complemented by electives on photography in various regions such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The aim, as teacher Andrei (personal communication, April 10, 2019) explains, is that students "know about great photographers and photojournalists from all around the world", because "it is extremely important for us to preserve the time chain" (cf. Frosh, 2024). As his colleague Alexander (personal communication, April 9, 2019) notes, "if students shoot a social photo project, they must know how it has been done before them – who Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and Dorothea Lange were". Students are therefore expected to visit photography exhibitions, follow international photography competitions, and produce written analyses of the images they encounter.

Course plans and reading lists show that the programme encourages students to reflect on the history of photography across art and journalism. For example, the second part of the course History of Domestic Photojournalism addresses the influence of art on Soviet photoreportage in the 1920–1930s and the use of montage as photopropaganda during the same period. Students engage with the period not only through scholarly literature but also by examining newspapers, magazines, and photo albums from the era. This contextualisation prompts critical reflection on contemporary photographic practices and the political and economic conditions shaping documentary photography and photojournalism today.

At RMS, too, photographic history serves as a reference point and a starting ground for discussions of students' own projects. What begins with analysing the work of others continues with the development of students' own ideas and culminates in new projects, thereby linking past and future. As teacher Leonid (personal communication, March 28, 2019) explains:

when it comes to the history of photography, I show different movements and languages. We analyse them. We look at how a photograph is constructed, the main trends and the main "languages". Photography is a conversation about languages. We look at different events and authors.

RMS students acknowledge that working at the intersection of photography and art — as their chosen track requires — makes it particularly important to study art history. As student Nadezda (personal communication, April 3, 2019) puts it, "the History of Art course should last more than one year; ours is very brief. (...) And with seminars, discussions". Her classmate Victoria (personal communication, April 3, 2019) adds that it would be desirable to study "not only art history, but also the history of material culture,

aesthetics, philosophy — a complex of subjects that helps systematise everything in context". Thus, knowledge expands the interpretive resources available for seeing.

This emphasis on *episteme* as a foundation for developing photographic seeing in the Russian photography schools most likely reflects the influence of the liberal arts tradition on the education of both (photo)journalists and artists (Åker, 2023). At the same time, during the Soviet period, photography was often understood primarily as a craft concerned with documenting life rather than as an art form (Werneke, 2026), meaning that contemporary photography education engages with and negotiates both traditions. NPS represents a different educational trajectory, in which photographers were traditionally trained in newsrooms, through apprenticeships, or in vocational schools until the 1980s (Östlind, 2022a, 2022b). Reflecting its orientation towards industry needs, NPS devotes less curricular space to the history of photography in journalism and art than do MSU and RMS. Yet, NPS teachers encourage students to engage with the history of photography by attending exhibitions and reading photography books, as historical knowledge provides additional resources for evaluating and discussing image quality. NPS students and *alumni* noted that they would have welcomed more photography history in their education, suggesting that it would have stimulated deeper discussions and enhanced their ability to "look at pictures in a completely different way" (Iris, personal communication, February 13, 2020), including recognising intertextual, or "intervisual", dialogues between images. As NPS student Peter (personal communication, March 9, 2020) put it, what is needed is "awareness around the image" — the opportunity, while studying, "to train oneself to see what a good image is. Before, one might have had the capability to see good light, but now one can also answer: *why* is this good light?".

Thus, despite broader contextual and institutional differences, participants across all three schools consistently identified "knowledgeable vision" as a foundational element of professional photographic seeing, even though the degree of emphasis placed on *episteme*, or cognition, varied across programmes.

"ETHICAL AND CRITICAL VISION": LOOKING AT THE WORLD AND OWN PRACTICE THROUGH THE FRAME OF PROFESSIONAL (AND HUMANITARIAN) STANDARDS

"Ethical and critical vision" (cf. Azoulay, 2008; Bengtsson Lundin, 2021) is closely tied to the normative frameworks within which future professional photographers are expected to operate (Mäenpää, 2022). At all three schools, there are either dedicated courses on ethics (MSU) or course modules that focus specifically on professional ethics and its various aspects (NPS and RMS). Importantly, professional ethics is discussed not only as an abstract framework but also in practical application — for example, in seminar discussions on the ethics of publishing graphic content and in *practicums* that imitate real-life journalistic practice (MSU), in various situations involving ethical choices during internships (NPS), and during midterm and final examinations (RMS). Students are encouraged to closely follow international contests, such as World Press Photo, with their

rules and requirements, and see them as benchmarks of this commitment. Such shared references to internationally recognised frameworks suggest a degree of convergence in how professional ethics is understood across different educational settings.

Educators and students across the three schools identified two partially distinct evaluative dimensions of professionalism, with differences reflecting programme specialisations rather than geographic context. At MSU and NPS — both primarily oriented toward documentary and photojournalistic genres — photographic *ethics and moral consciousness* are central (cf. Ferrucci et al., 2020; Foreman, 2016; Maslov, 2014; Mortensen, 2014; Postema & Deuze, 2020). According to participants, photographers must remain aware of ethical considerations throughout production and dissemination, ensuring that the final work demonstrates commitment to professional values and standards (cf. Ferrucci et al., 2020; Mäenpää, 2022; Theodosiadou et al., 2021). As NPS teacher Carina (personal communication, September 27, 2019) explained, a professional photographer — particularly in journalism — should be ethically conscious and prepared “to see several sides of the matter once you are there”. Yet some NPS students felt that the programme did not provide sufficient space for deeper discussions of photographic ethics and morality. As student Fredrika (personal communication, March 9, 2020) expressed,

we could have had [even] more discussions about ethics and morality, and what one’s role is as a professional photographer. We all come from different backgrounds. And [we should learn to] understand what is okay and not okay, and which situations you should avoid, and how to approach someone to be able to photograph.

At RMS, with its artistic orientation, *critical thinking and (self-)reflexive capacity* emerged as the key evaluative skills (cf. Berezin, 2009; Theodosiadou et al., 2021). These capacities define how one gains control over one’s vision (cf. Favero & Lehmuskallio, 2025). As teacher Leonid (personal communication, March 28, 2019) explained, evaluative and cognitive dimensions of professionalism are closely intertwined: critical thinking — which he sees as central to an artist’s position — must be grounded in broad knowledge of history, literature, geography, and politics. Aesthetic considerations (cf. Mortensen, 2014), he argues, are secondary and can only be developed based on such a critically informed worldview. Almost directly citing Berger (1972), Leonid says:

there is a difference between knowing and seeing. The experience of seeing gives you one thing, and the experience of knowing gives you something else. (...) It would be a good idea to study the context and the time that we live in (...); it is important to have a *critical worldview*. (...) What is an artist’s stance? It appears thanks to you *looking at things critically*. It is connected to history and culture. (...) What is the world you exist in like? And *then* come the aesthetic qualities.

The ability to interpret and contextualise a situation based on knowledge (Ferrucci et al., 2020) was identified by nearly all educators and students as both an evaluative and a performative skill central to professionalism. As MSU teacher Viktor (personal communication, April 13, 2019) explained, "history will preserve photos created not only by good photographers but by those who *think* — those who do not merely assess the documentary aspect but *reveal* something more through their perception".

Both critical thinking and self-reflexive capacity can be understood as a meta-perspective on photographic practice and the surrounding reality, a concept emphasised in research on practical knowledge. Developing "morally pervaded practical wisdom" (Eisner, 2002, p. 381) is crucial for cultivating the professional photographer's civil gaze (Azoulay, 2008; Bengtsson Lundin, 2021), a socially aware, justice-oriented form of seeing.

At the same time, these results should be interpreted in relation to the period in which the fieldwork was conducted. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (in Russia, called "special military operation"), the Russian media and cultural landscape has undergone substantial changes (e.g., Nygren, 2023). It is therefore possible that understandings of "ethical and critical vision", as well as the professional norms associated with it, have evolved in ways not captured by the present study, both within professional practice and within photography education. Consequently, the interpretations documented here should be understood as reflecting the specific historical context of the fieldwork rather than as necessarily representative of subsequent developments.

"CREATIVE VISION": SEEING AS AN ACT OF PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

Students and teachers discussed enskilled vision not only as a cognitive but also as a performative ability. For instance, MSU student Aleksei (personal communication, April 13, 2019) emphasised the equal importance of operating a camera and being able to "see the shot in advance" (cf. Gough-Brady, 2021; Mäenpää, 2022). MSU Student Kira (personal communication, April 12, 2019) added, "you must understand how it will look in print or on a website". Her classmate Margarita (personal communication, April 12, 2019) noted that this trained gaze — "figuring everything out quickly, understanding which shot you need, which plan" — enables one to be "quick and transportable", a performative skill that allows professionals to compete effectively with amateurs (cf. Mäenpää, 2022, 2023; Schmieder, 2016).

Similarly, RMS students Victoria, Mila, and Antonina view knowledge of art history and culture — the cognitive dimension of professionalism — as a necessary foundation for developing performative skills, such as documenting quickly and aesthetically (cf. Ferrucci et al., 2020; Mäenpää, 2022; Mortensen, 2014; Schmieder, 2016; Schwarz, 2019):

to be capable of documenting, you need to have a lot of *nasmotrennost'*. When you document, sometimes you have to do it very quickly because reality is passing by very quickly. And to do it in an aesthetic way, to have an aesthetic impact on a viewer, you need an experienced eye. To be capable of creating the image within your frame without spending a lot of time on it. (Victoria, personal communication, April 3, 2019)

Overall, from what I have noticed, many people do not perceive a visual toolset as a necessity. Knowing exposition – yes, but simple basics of composition and the way light behaves seem to be optional. You can add *nasmotrennost'* in terms of the history of culture there because (...) it is the necessary basis without which you cannot use the language. (Antonina, personal communication, 3 April 2019)

Such descriptions illustrate the transformation of general knowledge into embodied and situated practical competence. Participants describe a form of situational responsiveness characteristic of practical knowledge traditions. Visual erudition appears increasingly integrated with photographic practice itself.

Importantly, acquiring *skilled vision* through visual erudition also involves “unlearning” an “amateur” way of seeing shaped by the “single-image era”, as NPS recent *alumnus* Samuel (personal communication, February 13, 2020) put it. Learning to think in series that convey meaningful stories is likewise understood as something developed through visual experience (cf. Mäenpää, 2022; McQuire et al., 2024; Schmieder, 2016). As Samuel and Iris discussed in the focus group interview:

he [the head of the school] talked about having to read photography books – that we were missing a lot of photography history, sort of. (...) There is not a lot of photo history to study [at the school], but we have looked at pictures in a completely different way [anyway]. (Iris, personal communication, February 13, 2020)

Yeah. We grew up more in the single image era, kind of. Where a picture should basically say it all. Or be stylish and attract attention. And that's a bit of maybe... ah, the approach you came up with right away when you started [your education] there, and that's what you were striving for in the beginning, and they're something you've had to “unlearn” over time. (Samuel, personal communication, February 13, 2020)

Similarly, NPS students Peter and Fredrika consider the ability to tell a story through photographic series to be one of the most important aspects of professional development (cf. Mäenpää, 2022; McQuire et al., 2024; Schmieder, 2016). As expressed by

Fredrika (personal communication, March 9, 2020), visual storytelling and understanding how to build series are “the foundation of our education”. Peter reflected (personal communication, March 9, 2020):

I would take a much better portrait today than I would a year ago. A lot — because now I have gained knowledge about light in a completely different way, and visual storytelling is also a big thing. Today, if you look at Instagram and everything like that, it is quite common that there is a lot of focus on the “pretty” picture. It should be a picture that is really “cool”, gets a lot of “likes”, and gets spread. But then you probably also lose focus on the visual narrative [if you only focus on the “pretty” pictures]. And taking nice pictures, there will always be a lot of people who are good at it, but *telling a story* with a picture — feels like something that you will always have a big advantage if you can do it, against other photographers.

According to students, *visual cultivation* is crucial both for analysing others’ images (skilled vision as interpretation; cf. Favero & Lehmuskallio, 2025; Lehmuskallio, 2019) and for creating their own stories (skilled vision as a basis for production; cf. Mäenpää, 2022). Images produced by others serve as important “reference points”. As MSU student Glafira (personal communication, April 13, 2019) noted, developing one’s own style and creativity is closely tied to the ability to interpret other photographers’ visual narratives:

I would like to develop a skill of reading information from a photograph, understanding it. Reading stories in a short period of time. Sometimes a textual caption helps, but sometimes I see it [the image] differently. I would like to see series the way their authors intended. I still lack some *nasmo-trennost’*. I would like my photos to be more documentary. I would like to understand others’ photos better.

At NPS, with its emphasis on preparing freelancers for diverse “clients”, there is also a focus on adapting to the style and vision of the media or organisation the photographer works for (cf. Thomson, 2018). The growing emphasis on entrepreneurship reflects broader transformations in cultural and media labour markets, where stable professional careers have become less common, and photographers are increasingly expected to manage themselves as independent cultural producers (e.g. Mäenpää, 2023). For NPS recent *alumnus* Samuel (personal communication, February 13, 2020), however, the challenge of following market demands is that it can compromise the photographer’s critical standpoint in relation to the image:

I, who hadn’t photographed basically anything before I started the education, might not have had any major thoughts about visual storytelling and

how to do it at all. And I feel that I have... It's something that was missing for me in the education — talking more about images, the role of images and how to tell stories in images in general, and what an image says.

Educators aim to train the skills that will support future professionals in their careers. For example, MSU teacher Denis (personal communication, April 15, 2019) creates stressful situations to develop students' ability to act quickly and creatively (cf. Mäenpää, 2022). In one assignment, he "makes them experience the reality of working in media" by assigning a topic and requiring each student to "create an illustration for it, find and capture a photo for it" within an hour and a half. His colleague Fedor (personal communication, April 15, 2019) similarly challenges students to "think [and act] creatively" under time pressure, instructing them to "capture intimacy, capture coldness, capture warmth". At NPS, teacher Susanne (personal communication, June 8, 2020) stresses the importance of "stressful situations" in education so that students learn to work quickly in varied conditions and transmit images directly from the camera. Yet, NPS graduate Helene (personal communication, March 4, 2020) felt that school conditions still did not fully replicate the pressures of professional practice, limiting students' development of essential performative skills: "I didn't like that [at school] you sort of had four weeks to edit a picture, that is. I'm so used to things going fast in the newspaper world".

This emphasis on rapid decision-making, particularly in the media industry, reflects broader descriptions of professional expertise, where action is expected to occur under conditions of uncertainty and limited time (cf. Mäenpää, 2022, 2023). The findings suggest that photography schools do not merely teach visual techniques but seek to cultivate the integration of knowledge, professional judgment, and practical skills that enable professional photographers to respond swiftly and appropriately in particular situations. As expressed by the MSU teacher Viktor (personal communication, April 13, 2019), who reflected on time from a philosophical rather than an instrumental perspective, the cognitive, evaluative, and performative dimensions of practice — or *episteme*, *phronesis*, and *techné* — come together in the photographic moment, where only a knowledgeable, reflective and self-reflexive professional with a well-trained eye and practiced hand can succeed: "photography is the art of quick thinking and long reflection; it is the art of a fraction of a second. You can either fill this fraction of a second with your intelligence or your foolishness".

CONCLUSIONS

Although education marks only the beginning of future professionals' socialisation into photography, it is here that the transformation of their vision into *skilled*, photographic seeing and looking begins. In this article, I approach *skilled vision* by examining the intersections between the theoretical frameworks of professionalism and practical

knowledge, drawing primarily on Mäenpää (2022), who emphasises the practical implications of skilled vision for professionals, and Favero and Lehmuskallio (2025), who discuss the enskillment of vision as a reflective practice. The empirical material points to three analytical dimensions through which students and educators articulate the cultivation of professional photographic seeing: a cognitive dimension ("knowledgeable vision"), associated primarily with forms of *episteme*; an evaluative dimension ("ethical and critical vision"), associated with *phronetic* judgment; and a performative dimension ("creative vision"), associated with *techné*. These dimensions identified in the analysis are understood as resources that contribute to the development and enactment of skilled vision that emerges through their integration in situated photographic practice. In relation to broader transformations in photography, engagement with these three dimensions can be understood as an educational response to the challenges of visual abundance, intensified competition, and ongoing negotiations over the social role and legitimacy of professional photographers.

Despite differences in broader contexts and educational structures, participants across all three schools articulated remarkably similar understandings of professional photographic skilled vision. This may reflect the transnational character of contemporary photographic culture, in which visual references, professional norms, and educational models circulate across national borders. At the same time, current trends toward geopolitical fragmentation and reduced cross-border exchange in Russia may challenge or reconfigure this tendency towards the increasing homogenisation of photographic and educational cultures.

Across all three photography schools in Sweden and Russia, both students and educators emphasised the importance of broad knowledge spanning multiple disciplines within and beyond visual culture — including photojournalism, documentary photography, and art — and particularly the role of visual erudition and experience. According to participants and reflected in programme syllabi, this knowledge provides the foundation for developing a framework through which photographers see and represent the world. This "knowledgeable vision" encompasses the ability to interpret others' images and to create one's own photographs that engage in dialogue with global visual culture through conscious references (intertextuality or intervisuality — Ilan, 2014; Mirzoeff, 2002), thereby preserving and contributing to collective cultural memory (cf. Frosh, 2024). History of photography and art, participants noted, is key to expanding the horizon of a photographer's vision.

Visual erudition was mentioned more directly and frequently by Russian participants at both MSU and RMS, likely due to the existence of a specific term, *nasmotrennost'*, which has no direct Swedish equivalent, and the influence of a liberal arts tradition in Russian higher education — a tradition that RMS also reflects despite offering an "additional education" not leading to formal certification (see also Åker, 2023). Russian

photography educators, even without knowing how the cultural and media landscape would change after 2022, noted that only some graduates would pursue professional careers in photography. For others, who may have to work in different fields, this “knowledgeable vision” will serve as a “lifebuoy” — a form of symbolic capital valued and applicable beyond photography.

The prominence of *nasmotrennost'* among Russian participants may indicate a distinctive pedagogical and professional vocabulary for discussing visual experience. However, caution is warranted in interpreting the absence of a direct Swedish equivalent as evidence of fundamentally different conceptions of photographic learning. Similar ideas emerged in Swedish interviews and focus group discussions through references to visual familiarity, image consumption, engagement with photographic traditions, and visual literacy. The difference may therefore be partly linguistic and pedagogical rather than exclusively cultural, although it also reflects divergent educational traditions and institutional priorities. More broadly, the findings suggest that visual erudition is becoming increasingly important as photographers are required to navigate and position their work within an increasingly saturated visual environment, where producing something new while simultaneously situating it within a historical continuum becomes progressively more challenging.

As highlighted in studies of professionalism and by Mäenpää (2022) in her research on skilled vision in photojournalistic practice, skilled vision also involves the ability to be critical — both toward the external world and one's own practice. A professional photographer is expected to operate within professional standards, particularly ethics and morals. Photographers must also be critical of social hierarchies, cultivating a “civil” or “critical gaze” (Azoulay, 2008; Bengtsson Lundin, 2021). This “ethical and critical” dimension of skilled vision is a key focus in photography education in both countries, despite shifting educational programmes that increasingly highlight entrepreneurship and competitiveness. The value given to “ethical and critical vision” may reflect broader concerns regarding the legitimacy of professional photographic representation in contemporary media environments, where questions of manipulation, trust, and responsibility have become increasingly salient. At the same time, the emphasis on “ethical and critical vision” across all three programmes suggests that photography education continues to position ethical decisions and critical thinking as key markers of expertise in both journalism and art, even as technological developments and digital platforms have lowered barriers to image production. In this context, professional photographic seeing derives its legitimacy not primarily from technical mastery but from the ability to interpret, evaluate, and represent the world responsibly. The convergence across both contexts is particularly notable given their differing political, cultural and media environments. Rather than reflecting national divergence, the findings suggest a shared professional discourse in photography education, in which questions of representation,

responsibility, and reflexivity are central to professional identity. However, the balance between professional standards and broader moral or humanitarian concerns varies by field (journalism or art) rather than by national context.

As the fieldwork predates 2022, any interpretation of subsequent developments necessarily remains tentative. A follow-up study would be needed to assess how ethical and critical dimensions of photographic practice are currently taught, perceived, and enacted. It is possible that, in the present Russian context, political conditions more strongly shape the directions in which visual attention can be oriented (cf. Lehmuskallio, 2019), thereby affecting the scope for "ethical and critical vision" as it was articulated in the educational settings observed in this study.

Knowledge, professional standards, and critical thinking are seen by students and educators as key affordances for professional vision, enabling control of attention while looking (cf. Favero & Lehmuskallio, 2025) and supporting quick, creative action in producing images for others. Echoing scholarly discussions, participants emphasise that skilled vision involves not only seeing the world as an image but as a series of images — a visually told story (cf. Gough-Brady, 2021; McQuire et al., 2024; Schmieder, 2016). Skilled vision also entails "unlearning" the amateur way of focusing on single "nice" images.

Linguistic metaphors were common: both Russian and Swedish participants likened photography to a language, where knowledge of grammar (technology), standards of use (ethics and morals), and, above all, practice are essential for mastering the language to tell meaningful stories — echoing the epigraph's idea of the expressive word capable of "searing hearts of men". The recurrence of this metaphor suggests that participants understand professional seeing not as an innate talent (although they often referred to an "inner sense" that students are expected to possess before beginning their education), but as a socially acquired competence (cf. Favero & Lehmuskallio, 2025; Grasseni, 2004), cultivated to enable photographers to interpret the world critically and communicate meaningful stories through ethically and professionally informed photographic practice. Furthermore, the findings support the view that skilled vision is not a fixed professional attribute but an evolving capacity shaped, among other factors, in educational contexts, which themselves continuously adapt to technological and cultural change (cf. Favero & Lehmuskallio, 2025).

Another observation is that future professionals, while learning to see professionally and unlearning the "ordinary" way of seeing, must also retain some understanding of amateur vision to anticipate how non-professional viewers will perceive their images. This highlights a *duality* in the professional photographer's *skilled vision*: it must combine expert perception with the ability to see as a non-professional. This finding complicates common understandings of skilled vision as a movement away from lay perception. Rather than abandoning ordinary vision, photographers appear to develop the ability to perceive situations through professional visual conventions while simultaneously

anticipating how audiences will interpret images. Skilled vision therefore involves not only specialised perception but also the capacity to move reflexively between professional and non-professional modes of seeing. The need to retain an understanding of amateur vision may reflect the increasingly porous boundaries between professional and non-professional image production.

In summary, within the educational context, the enskillment of vision relies on knowledge (the cognitive indicator of professionalism), professional standards and critical thinking (the evaluative indicators), and practice (the performative indicator). Trained as practical knowledge, skilled vision is inseparable from thinking, reflection, and the ability to respond immediately and appropriately.

Educational contexts are always evolving, and as educators note, new approaches often replace old ones. Courses fostering the cognitive development of visual skills must be preserved, while critical discussions about photography's role in society grow (cf. Newbury, 1997). Similarly, learning to compete in the cultural and media industries by crafting a photographic language for diverse "clients" should not come at the expense of ethics and moral reflection. Technical skills remain essential, but they should not overshadow exploring new ways to contribute to democratic development.

The discussion of skilled vision in this article is limited by the scope of the empirical material. While this article has focused on didactics, future research could examine the consequences of these educational approaches for early-career photographers, for example through studies of programme alumni and their professional trajectories. Future studies could explore how vision is enskilled across a wider range of programmes, including more art-focused specialisations and more varied contexts — particularly where ethics and morals, and their implications for professional seeing, differ from those observed in Swedish and Russian programmes, where significant differences were not found. Quantitative studies focusing specifically on photographers and visual perception could complement the present qualitative findings by offering more generalisable insights. The future professionals examined here primarily see themselves as photographers, yet many will pursue careers as other visual professionals. Further research could examine how different educational approaches to skilled vision align with these diverse roles (e.g., photo-editor). It would also be valuable to situate professional seeing within the broader concept of professional visual literacy. Finally, as Favero and Lehmuskallio (2025) note, vision is only one sense and is influenced by the others; future studies could investigate how students and educators interpret and train other senses that may play an important role in professional photographic practice, for example, the role of smell and sound.

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