Return to Film Photography: A Personal Reflection

A friend recently spoke to me about the current popularity and resurgence of film photography in a world dominated by 1's and 0's. The idea percolated around in my head - and absent an Art related article this month from our regular AIR contributor, I thought I might put something together on the topic.

As I thought deeply on this subject, it grew into a personal reflection of my own journey with film photography. I became excited with the notion of looking back in time, and the elements that formed my love of photography. Time had numbed or suppressed this part of my life, and peeling back the years felt… well… good (this unplanned article may in fact result in future writing on this and other topics that led to EC-CHAP's existence).

With the reader's permission and patience, I am sharing a bit of my background and how I became involved with this medium. I am writing with the context of "film photography" representing the complete analog process from shutter press to final print.

I am not a digital photographer. I own a Cannon consumer DSLR camera received from my wife as a Christmas gift about seven years ago; but when it comes to every-day photos, I reach for my trusty iPhone.

My photographic background is with film. The combination of interests in the arts and pursuit of high quality images; along with technical inquisitiveness led to a passion for photography beginning in the early 1970's. This interest resulted in defining my undergraduate engineering program and culminating Mechanical Engineering degree from WPI, Worcester, MA.

When I entered college at WPI in 1972, a new and innovative project-based program was just being introduced and offered to students on an optional basis. It was called the "WPI Plan". This non-traditional approach to education included the following components and requirements for graduation:

- Grading for classes was non-traditional. There were no "A's", "B's", "C's", etc. There were only three grades: "Acceptable"; "Acceptable with Distinction"; or "No Record". No Record meant you failed or did not complete the course, and there was no record of the failure or incompletion on your transcript. You could continue to take the course until you passed (or ran out of money); and ultimately were required to achieve a certain number of credits as one of the graduating requirements.

- "Major Qualifying Project" (MQP): Develop and complete a project in your Major area of study
- "Interactive Qualifying Project" (IQP): Develop a project that integrated a technical area of study with Humanities.
- "Sufficiency": The Sufficiency represented the equivalent of a "Minor" area of study. If majoring in a technical subject, the Sufficiency (or Minor) must be in an area of Humanities.
- "Competency Exam": The student is given a real life problem to solve in their Major area if study. The problem is presented to the student by a committee of professors, and the student is given 48-hours to bring a solution back to the Committee. Any resources to solve the problem were fair game (remember - there was no Internet).

Hey - This article is about the new popularity of film photography; so why am I spewing about my undergraduate college graduating requirements? Hang in there just a bit longer…

No need to further bore you with classes or Competency Exam; but there is a connection to my MQP, IQP, and Sufficiency.

My Major Qualifying Project involved the creative design of a tabletop B&W film processor. A device that was not readily available to the consumer in 1976.

Conducting research and soliciting industry information, material specifications, and data was completed by writing letters via typewriter (on that thin onion-like paper); and distributing them to the major photographic manufacturers by US Postal service. It was just the way things were done - No email; No websites; and often, No response…

I recall designing gears; calculating loads; insuring compatibility with materials and processing chemicals; and prioritizing ease of use and affordability. Grade: Acceptable with Distinction.

The Interactive Qualifying Project entailed writing a photographic book titled: "B&W Exposure and Contrast Control for Amateur Photographers"

Having reviewed a number of photographic texts available at the time, I felt there was a need for an informal manual that was able to translate technical aspects of film characteristics and photographic topics into easily understood language for the non-technical reader. I provided the content, and collaborated with a graphic design student from Clark University; and later a bartender colleague and artist to illustrate the book. The entire text was hand written in a unique calligraphy style, and a fictitious character was developed to escort the reader through the material. (I may dig this out and include segments in another upcoming article). Grade: Acceptable with Distinction.

My Sufficiency - or Minor - was in Music. The project involved the analysis and interpretation of an original Glenn Miller orchestral arrangement from the 1940's.

The title of the tune escaped me as of this writing; however I recall writing to a vintage record shop and purchasing the original 78rpm record of the song. It was important that I had access to a turntable capable of spinning at that speed that allowed me to record the composition to a reel-to-reel tape recorder.

I remember having to schedule a trip to Boston and spend an entire day at the Boston Public Library. The covert plan was to make an underground copy of the entire original orchestral score of recorded song from the Reference Section with which to complete my analysis (though I wasn't dressed in a trench coat, I was certainly sensitive to watching eyes). Grade: Acceptable with Distinction.

So… We're finally getting to the meat & potatoes of this article! I formally entered the world of film photography in 1980, with the establishment of a photographic Sole-Proprietorship in NY State by the name of "Latent Image". The part-time enterprise focused on wedding and portraiture markets, with the objective of generating enough revenue to support high quality professional equipment purchases. The goal - Fine Art Photography.

Figure 1: Selection of Film Cameras and Accessories

It was the decade beginning in 1980 that I studied, experimented, and learned how to better "see" light, deepen my understanding of exposure and limitations of film and photographic papers. It was a time to develop muscle memory with respect to image visualization and the manual functions of the camera and lens - as an extension of the mind and body.

Figure 2: Dempsey Wedding - Copyright Latent Image

There are always factors associated with equipment selection. However, with film photography, the photographer had to consider film selection; film speed; film storage; process tolerance; specific color or B&W characteristics; process lead times; and more. Pictures or slides (transparencies) were the way to view the resulting photographic image. Though the film and papers available in the eighties had advanced considerably from early photographic days; and technical specifications and tolerances were more robust - the material capabilities were significantly narrow, finite, and certainly less forgiving than the making of a digital image.

Does this mean that a film photographer is more skilled than a photographer that exclusively shoots in the digital environment? No, I don't believe this is the case. However, I do think that skill sets are *different*.

Did someone say image quality and correction? The quality of an image made with film can be spectacular. Similarly, the quality of an image created with a digital camera can also have spectacular results. But what happens when the image created at the source (in the camera) is far less than spectacular? The capability of image correction in digital photography is significantly greater than with film. Image editing and correction in the darkroom cannot compare to the

Figure 3: Egg - Copyright Latent Image

computer applications available for exposure, color correction, and image enhancement available for digital photography today.

What about time? Analog photography involved time - time between the shutter press and the

Figure 4; Mr. Straighter - Copyright Latent Image

ability to see the result. Unless you developed your own film and printed your own photographs, you were at the mercy of third party photographic labs. If you were lucky, you had access to a local outlet for processing, so you may have results in a matter of days – or even hours for consumer processing at the 1-Hour Photo or corner pharmacy. But if you had more critical work to be processed, you may be waiting weeks for results – weeks for the first glance of the final image you created. What happens if you experience an unknown equipment failure? How do you recover? This is not the case in the digital world. You have instant gratification – the ability to see your creation immediately; and make appropriate adjustments in real time if required.

And then there's the cost… The cost of film, film processing, and printing forced the making of images to be more precise in the camera. Sure, critical images were bracketed +/- 2 to 3 f-stops; and professional medium and large format equipment may have had Polaroid backs to preview exposures and compositions. But each press of the shutter translated to $$$; unlike the digital environment of unlimited exposures constrained only by time and the capacity of the connected storage device.

I recently watched the feature film, "*Kodachrome*" (R) 2017 [1], starring Ed Harris and Jason Sudeikis. There is a segment in the film I thought worthy of sharing, and although fictitious characters, it provided a notable professional photographer's perspective of film versus digital photography. Here's the dialog:

Matt Ryder (Jason Sudeikis): "*It would have saved us a lot of trouble if you shot digital*".

Benjamin Asher Ryder (Ed Harris): *"…No matter how good something looks… can't beat the real thing. People are taking more pictures now than ever before, billions of them, but there*
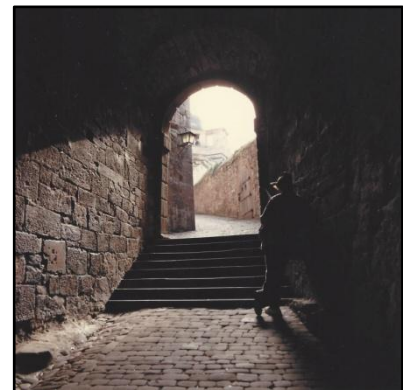

Figure 5: Artist, Germany - Copyright Latent Image

are no slides, no prints. Just data. Electronic dust. Years from now when they dig us up there won't be any pictures to find, no record of who we were or how we lived."
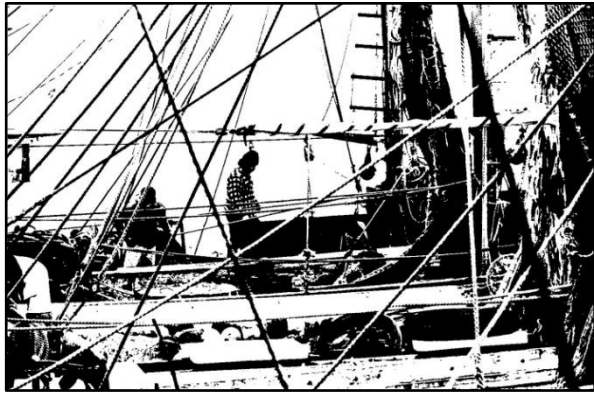
Figure 6: Provincetown Fishermen - Copyright Latent Image

So… if photographic film:
- Costs significantly more to produce an image
- Is harder to find
- Offers limited alternatives
- Requires "different" skills to use
- Takes longer to obtain results
- Less forgiving
- Extremely limited preview and editing capabilities

Then why is film photography experiencing resurgence and becoming more popular?

It appears the popularity of film photography began about five years ago, with a dramatic increase driven by the Pandemic. Many of those driving renewed interest in film photography are young folks in their teens and twenties who were born and grew up in a digital world and never experienced film photography. So these are individuals find the analog process to be new and interesting!

There is also a segment of older folks, who are now revisiting analog photography. Aaron Gold, writer for PopPhoto explains it this way, "A vast number of today's film photographers are not analog newbies, but rather experienced film users who are returning to the medium after years of shooting digital. With all the advances in digital and computational photography, it's no surprise that many photographers want to get back to a form of photography where skill matters more than the size of your CPU." [2]

For those entering the film photography world, it appears that used film cameras are readily available and quality equipment can be acquired with a small investment. That said, a whole new market is evolving, and prices are trending upward. As more people buy up available cameras, the prices for some camera models have steadily increased by 25-50% year-over-year.[4]

Stephan Jukic, Journalist for Shotkit writes, "Working with film undoubtedly creates a feeling of authenticity to photographic work that no casual digital image bathed in instant retro filter software can duplicate." [3]

The "Film Photography Blog" summarizes nine reasons for the return of film photography as follows:[4]
1. Authenticity & Credibility
2. Richer Images
3. Unmatched Aesthetics
4. Therapeutic

5. Making a print from the film is remarkably different from printing a digital image
6. Simplicity
7. Longevity and cost of film as a medium
8. Exclusivity
9. Authentic Look

I happened across a YouTube video "Why Film Photography is popular"[5] presented by Teo Crawford. Mr. Crawford summarized his research and opinions on this subject which formed the basis of his Bachelor's degree Thesis: *The Renaissance of Analog Photography and the new analogue generation in the digital world*". If you're interested in a deeper perspective on why we are experiencing increased popularity in film photography, I recommend you take a look at this video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vgi1vmHUsU).

What are your thoughts on the subject? If you are interested in sharing, please forward your comments to me at: info@ec-chap.org, "Subject: Film Photography". If we receive enough responses, we'll share them in a future article.

See the light!

Tom Buccino serves as EC-CHAP Executive Director and Acting Board Chair. Tom can be reached at: info@ec-chap.org.

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