Nouse🕊

Let's get physical

In an era of digital cameras, Jack Richardson considers whether we should be returning to film stock

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Image: Steve Payne

Go out to York or anywhere else on a sunny day and you'll see more and more film cameras slung around the shoulders of passers-by. Like vinyl, film photography is experiencing a resurgence, especially among those for whom the medium was already outdated when they reached their teens.

Film has always been the technology of choice for some professional photographers. Not only is it much cheaper to use large film sizes than it is to use large digital sensors (which regularly run into the tens of thousands of pounds for the body alone), but film still has an advantage with things like dynamic range, which allows it to show both the very bright and the very dark parts of a scene. Try taking a photo of a sunset on your phone and you'll see how far behind our eyes digital sensors still are.

The fact that film photography often requires much more manual control, and is comparatively less forgiving than digital, also makes it a common step for those wishing to improve their photography.

These two groups, in my opinion and experience, have existed since digital cameras became mainstream. But just as vinyl has moved out of the basements of audiophiles and into youth culture, so has film use boomed. To a significant degree, I put this down to a desire to reclaim those aspects of film that were lost in the move to digital: physicality, randomness and ritual.

A mobile phone now has a camera that's good enough for just about anyone. Just look at the shots taken by David E. Klutho on the new iPhone 7 at an NFL game to advertise the device's camera. Now we expect

this level of performance. This takes the pressure off image creation. A film camera from the 1980s isn't too big, looks nice and can be used to take an excellent photo, but there's nothing stopping someone from taking out their phone straight after to snap exactly the same shot. Nevertheless, the ritual of physical dials, a mechanical shutter, winding the film on and later getting the photos developed is something that's as novel to our generation as it was inconvenient to our parents and grandparents.

To those unused to film photography, and especially those unused to manual controls, the experience carries with it a degree of randomness. Messing up an exposure, blurring the image or missing focus are increasingly difficult to do on a mobile phone but are the blights of a film photographer's first attempts. For us, who can get a technically perfect image without trying, this randomness allows us a new, more conceptual vision of the world around us.

The price of being able to carry every photo we've ever taken in our pockets is that they are stored digitally, not physically. This has its benefits, but to those who see this as expectation, not convenience, its flaws are apparent also. File formats change, for one thing. In 10 years time, I'm unlikely to be able to display the photos I took yesterday without some serious jiggery-pokery. Physical prints last as long as you can keep them, with no special equipment needed. Especially with the trend towards instant photography, these prints are not only physical but unique. In a world where sharing is key, the ability to only pass on a single version makes the action all the more special.

Apple was lambasted for saying it 'took courage' to remove the headphone jack from the iPhone 7 and for describing the industry standard audio connection as 'old' and 'analogue'. They were not wrong on any count. But while advances towards digital have been a major factor in the death of analogue technology, they have also allowed an entirely new generation of photography enthusiasts to experience the latter with the former as a kind of safety net. Committing photos to a 36-exposure roll of film nowadays takes courage also. Ironically, the very technologies that pushed film away now allow more of us to experience it.

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