

Photography

# Film-Photography Renaissance

February 24, 2018 | Charles T. Low, Photographer

## The Return to Film and to the Darkroom

Most photographers, from the casual to the transcendent, have by now converted to "digital".

Film photography, however, does seem to be enjoying a bit of a renaissance, and we could quite rightly ask: *why*?

**Can we make better images with film cameras than with digital cameras?**

Kindly indulge me while I nuance the complexities of my considered opinion:

**NO!!!**



-scanned from a print from a slide, then edited

The simple fact seems obvious to me that "digital" surpasses "film" in just about every category conceivable. Some people claim to prefer the "look" of film better. But one can analyze the sparse data on that either way.

Some people, it appears, just like the *nostalgia* of film.

Now ... I "get" nostalgia. I may even have experienced it once or twice myself. But does "nostalgia" show in the eventual image, whether on a monitor or printed? And isn't the eventual image what we're really - usually - working towards?

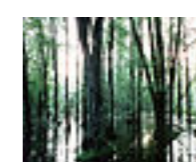
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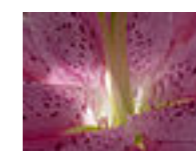
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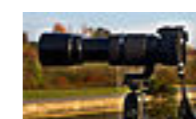
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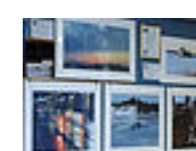
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This is a slightly-edited digital image. The unfair comparison with the swampy woods, above, does however illustrate how nothing is lost, and probably something gained, in the conversion from "film" to "digital".

Of course, we cannot show here whether a *print* would look better if originally from film, or from digital. I can only say that I don't see a difference; if anything, for reasons I will describe, the scope of digital often provides *better* images.

Photographic film provides prints. Digital cameras provide computer files, and I will agree with the digital critics who say that we print too few of them.

Also true, film does make one slow down. Slowing down, thinking more about each shot, sounds ... *good!* And among the more mundane considerations, every release of the camera shutter costs quite a bit of money.

However, we cannot immediately see our film photos (Polaroids excepted), so have to wait until we've taken our whole roll of film, then send it in for developing, and a week or so later, see what we got.

Ah, the *anticipation!*

But clearly, for those so inclined, the learning from digital photography can occur in such a more timely manner. You can, with no significant cost, make as many photographs as you like, varying the exposure or the composition, seeing and learning almost right away how that's going.

So, if we find ourselves using digital photography to make lots of photographs without thinking, then I see at least two choices:

1. regress to film;
2. **try thinking.**

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My usual work flow, going wa-a-ay back to the days of film, uses "aperture-priority" mode, so that I can control the depth-of-field by actively choosing an aperture, and then I pay attention also of course to the shutter speed.

In almost every way beyond that, digital photography affords me options to produce better photographs.

Just this past week, I attended a seminar by [Michelle Valberg](#), entitled "Wild Creatures. Extreme Conditions." at the [Museum of Nature](#) in Ottawa, and she stated:

- how happy she was that she had started with film, and
- how happy she was that she had converted to digital.

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She showed us a shot she got at an ISO of 10,000, perhaps the one near the bottom of this page, of a bear emerging from its den (and she said that her camera has an ISO setting going up to 1,000,000!). It was always pushing film to get to even 800. Valberg had "no light" and although image quality degrades with higher ISO's, she could not have even registered a useable exposure of that shot with film.

Contrast that with one of my early-career inspirations, photographer Freeman Patterson. Last I heard, he was still shooting with film. I hope one day to ask him why.



I was able to get this ornamental pickup truck (at the Blue Mountain Resort at an ISO of 1,600, hand-holding at 1/45 seconds, i.e. already not a blazingly fast shutter speed, and f5.6, which gave me enough depth of field. I was on the move, without a tripod, and that combination of exposure settings would not have been possible with film.

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## Other attributes of digital photography

Digital photography provides almost *innumerable* advantages over film, beyond the low cost-per-shot, adjustable ISO, and the immediacy of feedback. I cannot list everything, but will discuss a few.

- white balance;
- JPEG conversion (colour saturation, contrast, sharpness ...);
- histogram;
- high dynamic range;
- focus stacking;
- focussing tools (preview-magnification, peaking);
- post-processing.

**Colour temperature**, adjustable on cameras as "white balance" ("WB") means that the camera's computer adapts to the colour of the light it receives. We can set this to "Auto" but often, for the serious photographer, she will choose a manual or custom setting.

Film came mainly in a "daylight" colour sensitivity, and most people used nothing else. We could also buy a "tungsten" colour balance film, for example, but I have never done so, and neither have I ever seen it in use.

So, photographs made indoors, with electric-bulb light, would come out orange. Photographs outdoors in the midday sun would come out faintly blue (hence the ubiquitous "81A", slightly pink, lens filter - no longer required).

The range of colour balance available to us now spans almost anything we might encounter (although LED lighting presents specific challenges).

**File format:** this refers to the type of image file which the camera provides. Most of us use "JPEG", those image files which end in the suffix ".jpg". Many cameras have adjustments to make these more (or less) vivid, saturate or desaturate the colours, apply "sharpening" to help the photo look more faithful to what the eye saw, adjust contrast, etc.

Modern JPEG engines simply make fabulous-looking pictures.



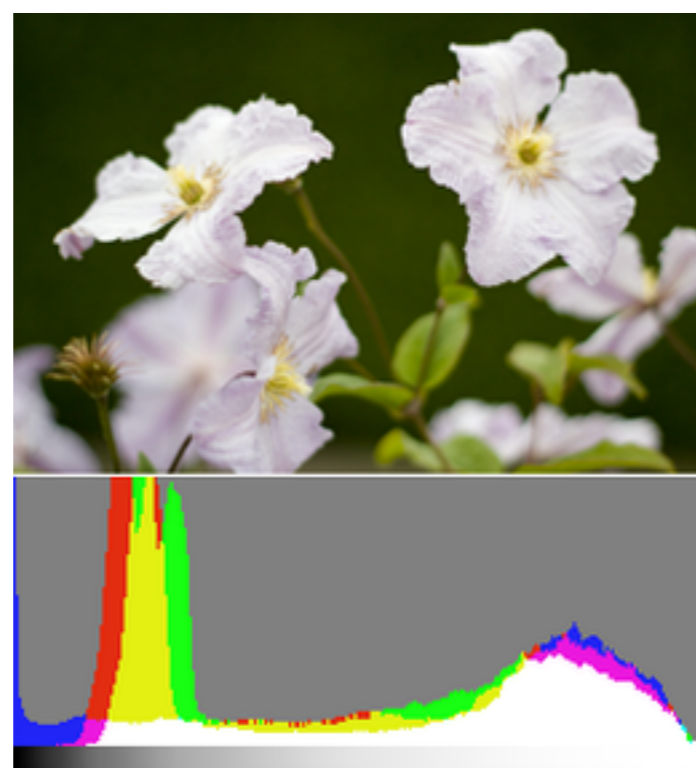
This particular image started as a JPEG and finished as a JPEG.

We can of course simply set our digital cameras on "Auto" and snap away. It's a perfectly valid option, if very decidedly not mine, and will often produce wonderful images.

JPEG "engines", the camera's computerized process for creating these files, however, also compress the data, and that creates some limitations for those wishing to do advanced editing. To get *all* of the image data, with finer tonal and colour gradations (i.e. more "bit-depth"), you need a "raw" image file.

I prefer to shoot in "JPEG+RAW", i.e. both (although not all cameras offer that option). That gives me the flexibility for the best of either world, as circumstances require. I won't say more just now about the ever-raging JPEG/raw debate.

The **histogram** provides immensely powerful information, letting the photographer know whether his exposure has enough light, but not too much. Check out "expose to the right" ("ETTR").



Histogram

**High dynamic range** - "HDR" - helps with scenes with excessive contrast, a tonal range too high for the sensor to accommodate. Often - not always - this requires several exposures, on a tripod so that each composition remains identical to the previous, and then the camera itself combines them into one image.



In this HDR image, my camera made five exposures, then blended them, thus taming the highlights while preserving shadow-detail - all at the simple push of a button!

**Focus stacking** often also requires several exposures, and the camera can then combine them to provide an image with a greater depth-of-field than otherwise possible.

We can also do HDR and focus stacking later on the computer, but vanishingly few of us will learn those advanced techniques, and the camera can do a credible job of it so easily - "easily" for us: programmers have spent years refining the digital algorithms.

**Focus aids**, in the digital age, provide incredible precision. On those occasions when auto-focus just isn't cutting it for me, I personally use "preview magnification" or "focus-peaking" (where the most in-focus parts of the image "sparkle" on the camera's preview screen).



-focus-peaking (in red, in this example)

**Film photography can accomplish none of the above.** And imagine what digital photography will offer in five or ten years - it hasn't finished advancing yet!

**Editing** - "post-processing", of course could also refer to working on a file scanned from a physical photograph, but I suspect that it works best when starting from a digital image directly from a camera. The fewer the steps, from digital to eventual processed photograph (on a monitor, or printed), the less the opportunity for image degradation.

"Post" (as we in the business call it!), of course has occupied entire books. It has brought photo-editing out of the darkroom ages. I will simply say that there are about five basic steps, which would take only an hour to learn, which accomplish 90% of what I want to do.

My basic workflow:

1. cropping;
2. tonal expansion;
3. colour correction;
4. colour saturation;
5. sharpness.

Beyond those lies a whole editing world of wonder. Feel free to inquire if you have an image which I can gussy up a bit for you.

Compare that with the work done in a physical darkroom. First of all, few individuals process *colour* film - far too finicky - whereas most of us shoot in colour, causing quite a disjunction. Think of the chemical exposure involved in film developing. Think of the time involved, and that, even of the minority who were willing to build darkrooms and then lock themselves away, few got into advanced

techniques such as "[dodging and burning](#)", whereas on a computer we can do that easily.



-nothing but one of my latest digital photographs

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### Why then can we still even get film?

Every product has a market. Whether someone believes that film makes better photographs, or whether they simply enjoy the nostalgia of film and its associated processes, it does seem to be enjoying a resurgence.

But as for me, I enjoy film as a *memory*. Those were great days.

**I see no reason to go back.**

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### While you're here:

Remember that I make photographs and that I sell photographs.

Almost everything which you see on this web site is for sale. Prices at the time of writing, for example, for an 11x14" fine-art print with a generous white border would be about \$40, and you can go up or down from there. Check the [rates](#) page. More importantly, check out my [gallery](#).

Book a [portrait-sitting](#) - the right frequency with which to commission formal portraits is a bit more often.

Remember also to leave a comment, or to [contact](#) me. Note that on the main [blog](#) page you can sign up for new-blog notifications. I am very careful and respectful with your privacy.

Thank you so much for reading.

**Charles T. Low  
Photographer**



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