

THE POPULARITY OF BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE WORLD OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

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1. Introduction

There are two basic photography techniques, black-and-white and colour technique. The black-and-white technique was the first one discovered, followed by the colour technique some 40 years later – the first permanent black-and-white photo was taken in 1826, and the first colour one in 1861 (Greenspun, 2007). Nowadays, digital photography makes it easy to use both techniques – all digital cameras take colour photos, while some offer the black-and-white option, and even if they don't, it is very easy to later change a colour picture into a black-and-white one on a computer. With analogue photography, this is not easy to do because of black-and-white and colour film rolls, and before placing the roll in the camera one has to choose the shooting technique, as it is not possible to change it later. As far as developing film goes, black-and-white films are more easily developed, and many photo-enthusiasts have done it at home in their own darkrooms. As far as studio developing goes, the development of colour film was more expensive than black-and-white development. All of this contributed to making black-and-white photography quite popular for a long time, until colour photography was rendered simpler, cheaper and more accessible in the second half of the 20th century, when colour photographs began to emerge in family albums.

The question this paper asks is directed towards the problem of black-and-white photography in today's digital age. It is apparent that black-and-white photography is seldom used, and the main question is why it is so – is the technique obsolete; was it used before only because it was simpler; do people think that black-and-white photography is only meant for artistically oriented people? Do they even ask themselves – black-and-white or colour? Do they think it is all the same, as long as you can see what is in the picture? What do they think of black-and-white photography?

From an artistic point of view, there does indeed exist a widespread opinion that black-and-white photography is more artistic. As soon as someone sees such a photo, they think: "This one is artistic..". And black-and-white photography does hold a more artistic value in photographers' and artists' circles. The question we ask is why is it so, is there any truth behind the statement?

The basic questions posed in this paper related to the subject of popularity of black-and-white photography are the following:

1. Why is black-and-white photography much less used today than colour photography?
2. What are people's tastes in photography, do they prefer black-and-white or colour photography?
3. Why is black-and-white photography considered more artistic?

2. Literature overview

An overview of photography-related literature has allowed us to establish that even in the case of famous photographers, most of whom have published at least one book, there are different opinions

on black-and-white and colour techniques; some prefer black-and-white, some colour, and some like both equally, depending on the situation they are shooting:“Black and white are the colours of photography.” (Frank, 1961). Edward Weston words:“ The prejudice many photographers have against colour photography comes from not thinking of colour as form.You can say things with colour that can’t be said in black and white... Those who say that colour will eventually replace black and white are talking nonsense. The two do not compete with each other. They are different means to different ends. (Bryn, 1978). Paul Outerbridge (1896 – 1958), an American photographer known for early use and experimenting with colour photography, said: “One very important difference between colour and monochromatic photography is this: in black and white you suggest; in colour you state. Much can be implied by suggestion, but statement demands certainty... absolute certainty.” (Scully, 1976)

There are countless books which could serve as references in this paper. With the development of digital photography and its globalization, numerous editions of guidebooks, instructions, consultancy books, etc. continue to appear. Virtually every better known photographer has published a book on photography, and each of these books contains at least a paragraph dedicated to thoughts on black-and-white photography.

3. Hypothesis

There exists a widespread opinion that people who are more into photography, who don’t just take pictures in order to record an event permanently, but because they love photography, who are more knowledgeable about it, more artistically oriented – that they also possess a greater sense of black-and-white photography, and that is why they use it more often than those people for whom it does not represent any great value.

It therefore follows that those who have the eye and the sense for photography, those who are privy to its values and possibilities, can best use it in order to gain the best results in certain situations, as opposed to those who do not possess that sense for art and photography. The former make good use of it, but such aficionados are rare compared to the rest, who only find a use for colour photography. That is why it seems that black-and-white photography is less used than colour photography. It is true, when viewed from the perspective of the whole society, but from the perspective of that small segment of society that takes photography more seriously, the ratio of black-and-white versus colour photography is much smaller, if not equal.

As far as taste in black-and-white or colour photography is concerned, it differs from person to person; some prefer black-and-white, some colour pictures, and to some it is all the same, so all in all, the results would be more or less equal.

We think that black-and-white photography is considered more artistic due to some kind of psychological effect, primarily because it was the first to be discovered, and also because it offers a different picture of the world than the one we are used to seeing with our own eyes. Then again, from a historical point of view, photography was considered an art long before the advent of colour photography, so that might also provide some answers to our query.

4. Methodology

In the first part of the survey the respondents are divided according to age, sex, and photographic interest. Then their taste in black-and-white and colour photography is surveyed, in two ways: via direct questions, as well as with the help of examples that the respondents have to rate, consisting of same photographs shown in black-and-white and colour technique. In that way, the same question is answered in two different manners, thereby becoming more accurate and precise. The examples are followed by direct questions regarding the popularity of black-and-white photography, why it is so rarely present today, and why it is considered more artistic.

5. Research

5.1. Respondents

5.1.1. Age and sex of respondents

Research was conducted primarily among the younger part of population, with both sexes equally represented (male 51%, female 49%), ages 18-29. 131 participants responded to the survey.

5.1.2. Interest of the respondents in art

Respondents mostly possess a developed sense of art and enjoy it. Female respondents are more interested in art than male respondents, since three times as many female respondents gave maximum votes to their love of art. Also, none of the female respondents rated their feelings with a 'I'm not interested in photography at all', while four male respondents did.

5.1.3. Interest of the respondents in photography

Nearly half the respondents feel a slightly bigger interest in photography, but have never ventured deeper into that sphere of art. Despite expectations that most people would describe their interest in photography in light of taking pictures and watching them on Facebook, in newspapers, etc., many respondents rated their interest in photography with a 'I'm interested in it as a hobby' and 'I'm very interested in it and everything related to it', that is, photography interests them more as a hobby, or even more than that. This all proves that photography is still popular today and that to most people it doesn't just represent a focusing of the lens and pressing of the shutter button, but something more, which is understandable, since photography is an art form that has the possibility to permanently stop time, events, feelings, which is what man has always wanted to do.

5.1.4. Respondents' pursuit of photography

Out of all the respondents, the majority (58) pursue photography doing what is normal today, carrying their small cameras around with them and taking pictures of family gatherings, travels, events, celebrations, etc., while a staggering 31 respondents pursue photography because of their love for it.

5.1.5. Respondents' knowledgeability about photography

Nearly 65% of the respondents know the basics of photography and exposition – in other words, a bit more than just pressing the shutter release button. It is interesting to note that none of the 131 respondents dared say that they know absolutely everything there is to know about photography. This only goes to show that photography is a very wide area, although it was discovered not two centuries ago, and that people have respect for it, know its value and importance, so they dare not claim they know everything about it.

5.2. Black-and-white technique

5.2.1. Black-and-white or colour

When asked which technique they prefer for taking photographs, 27 (20%) respondents answered colour, and 8 (6%) chose black-and-white technique. A staggering 88 (67%) answered that the choice depends on the situation being photographed and on the desired effect. It is interesting to note that none of the respondents consider black-and-white photography obsolete. This shows that black-and-white photography is still very much popular today, although it appears much less frequently than colour photography.

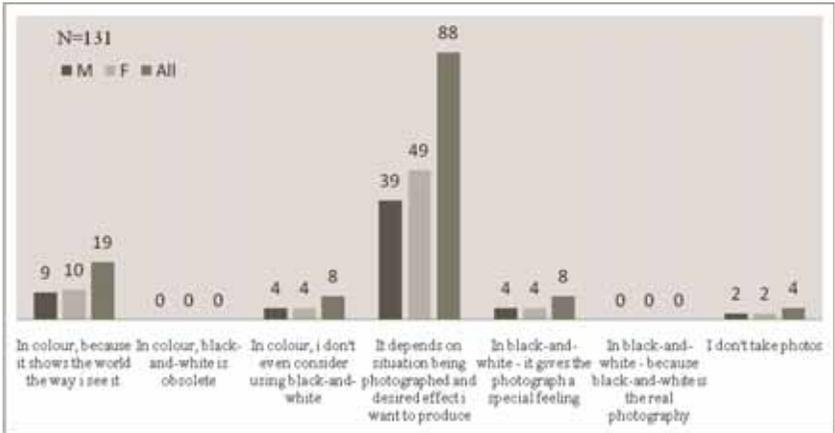


Figure 1. Black-and-white or colour – photographing

When asked which type of photography they generally prefer, a whopping 83% answered that they like good photographs, regardless of whether they are black-and-white or colour. This proves the claim that black-and-white and colour are only two photography techniques, and the choice depends on the artist himself/herself, and there is no law saying which technique is better or more beautiful.

5.2.2. The frequency of black-and-white photography

When asked how often they run into black-and-white photographs, how often they see them in newspapers, magazines, on the Internet, or anywhere they go, 50% answered that they run into them occasionally, 30% rarely, and 18% run into them very frequently. Only one respondent claimed to never come across black-and-white photos, as shown in Figure 2.

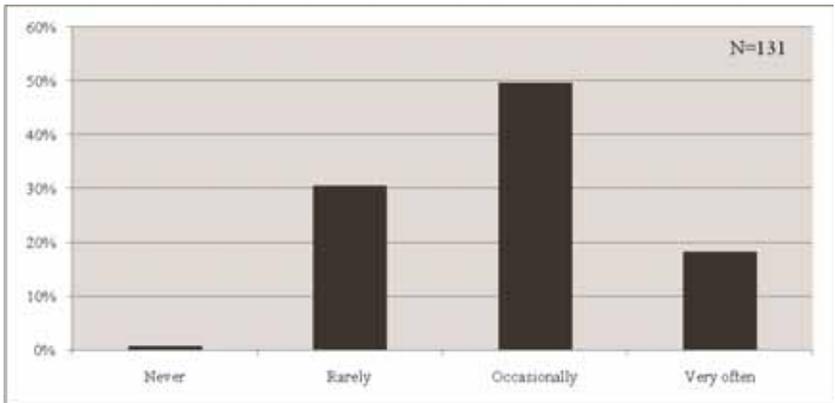


Figure 2. Frequency of black-and-white photography

If answers to the same question are divided according to the respondents and their pursuit of photography, as is shown in Figure 3, it is clearly visible that those who pursue photography because they love it, or for work purposes, also come across it more often, while on the other side, those who do not pursue photography at all, come across it much less frequently.

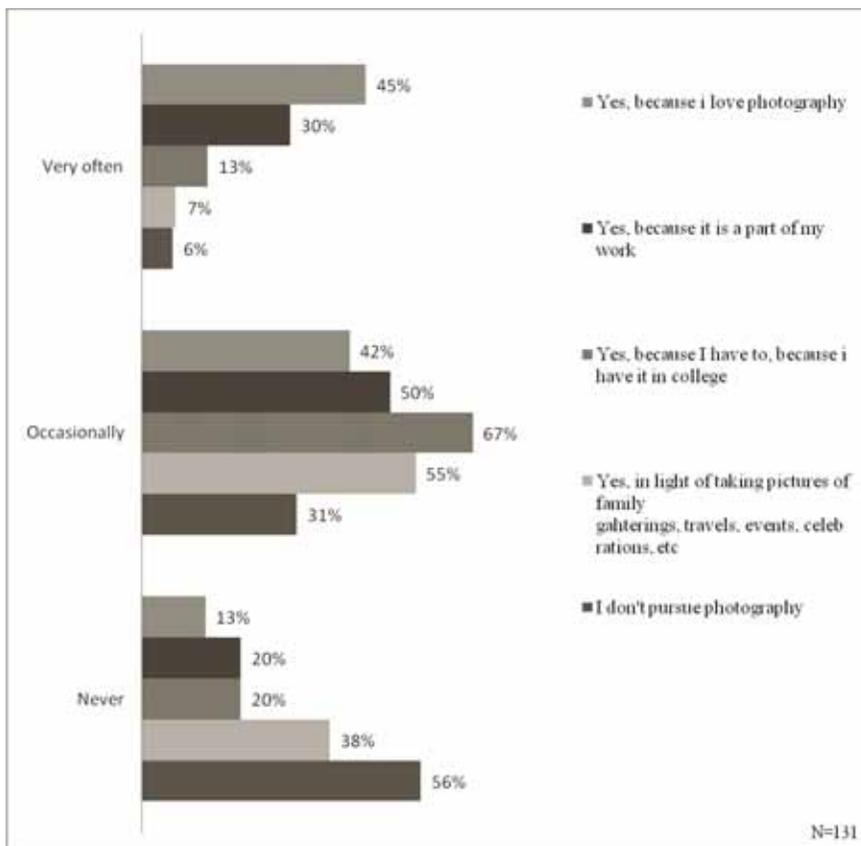


Figure 3. Coming across black-and-white photography (according to pursuit of photography)

5.2.3. Photography ratings

The following infographic shows all the photographs offered in the survey, which had to be rated according to their general mood. We must stress that these photos were taken by known art photographers, and they are originally colour photos, which means that the photographers shot and published them in colour. They have been rendered in black-and-white for the purposes of this research in order to elicit people's thoughts on which technique would suit the particular photo better, whether they would agree with the original photographer or whether they might think differently. The photos are classified in size and order according to the points (ratings) they received.

The largest photo has therefore received the highest ratings, and the smallest one the lowest ratings. This shows which photo is the best in the respondents' opinion, and which is the worst. It also shows clearly that colour photographs received higher ratings than the black-and-white ones. We can therefore conclude that the photographers knew well what they wanted to achieve with their photos, and, beside the chosen exposition, shooting angle, composition and other important points defining a photograph, they also chose their technique well.



Figure 4. Photography ratings

5.2.4. Why is the black-and-white technique less frequently used?

As expected, 70% of respondents answered that black-and-white photography is less used only in wider circles of photography, by people who are not so much into photography, while aficionados use it very often. 46% of answers point to the fact that the reason behind the less frequent use of black-and-white photography is that most people take pictures only to record an event that is important to them, and colour gives them more information about the event. This corroborates previous answers, which claim that black-and-white photography is less used only by wider circles, because people in these circles indeed take pictures only of events that are important to them, and colour does indeed suit them better in that case because it gives them more information about what that event looked like in reality (Figure 5.).

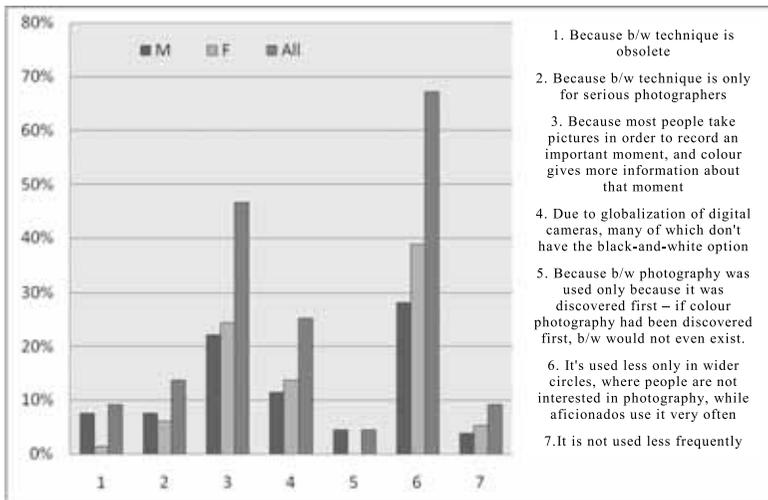


Figure 5. Reasons behind less frequent use of black-and-white photography

The third reason, accounting for 25% of the answers, is that the globalization of digital photography is to blame for less use of black-and-white photography, since many digital cameras do not even have the option of shooting black-and-white pictures. This also only corroborates the first answer, since it, too, refers to a wider circle of camera users, while those who are more into photography either have a camera with that option, or use a computer program to change colour photography into black-and-white.

5.2.5. *Why is black-and-white technique considered more artistic?*

Three of the most common answers to this question were the following: because it shows the world differently than man sees it, and because it lends itself to a more artistic result, while the third answer posited that both techniques could be equally artistic (Figure 6).

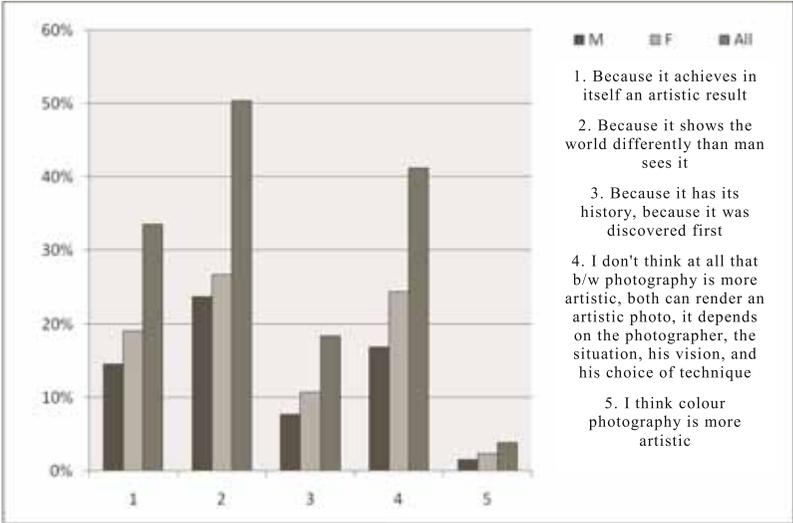


Figure 6. Why is black-and-white photography more artistic

6. Discussion

The results gleaned from the survey were mostly expected, although some represented pleasant surprises in terms of the popularity of photography in the world. Only 9 out of 131 respondents are not interested in photography beyond a mere snapping of a shot, while all the rest feel there is more to it than that. This proves that photography is a very popular art form, probably because it is accessible to everyone and has the potential to satisfy everyone who gets into it. From this, as well as from answers given to the question, “How much are you into photography?“, to which only 16 out of 131 respondents answered with a negative, we conclude that today photography is the most popular and most used branch of art, although much discussion could be made about whether it represents art in everyone’s hands. It cannot be called the most popular technology because only a look at mobile phones would disprove us. It suffices to say, though, that photography is very popular in today’s world. As far as black-and-white photography and its popularity are concerned, the results of the survey show that the majority of respondents don’t care if the photograph is black-and-white or colour, as long as it is good. 67% answered that they use either technique depending on the situation and the effect they wish to produce, and that is the most important conclusion gleaned from this survey. It says that black-and-white and colour photography are only means, instruments, different styles, with each giving a

special sound or feeling. The answers received to the question about why black-and-white technique is less used only corroborate the above mentioned conclusions, because these answers lead to the conclusion that black-and-white photography is less used in wider circles of camera users, by those who do not experiment with photography, while a narrower circle of professional photographers and aficionados use this technique very often.

7. Conclusion

The three most common reasons given as answer to the question why black-and-white photography is considered more artistic are the following: because it shows the world differently than man sees it, and because it lends itself to a more artistic result, while the third answer posited that both techniques could be equally artistic. This opens up a new topic, one which could be much discussed. As we have already concluded, each technique is special, each possesses characteristics which make it unique, and each is artistic in its own way. This question was only meant as a test to show how many people would answer that black-and-white is not more artistic, that both techniques are artistic in their own way. And a little over 40% of respondents did just that.

This paper has proved, that black-and-white photography was not merely a transitional process towards colour photography, since it was discovered first. It proved that black-and-white photography has something special in it which fascinates human eyes, which makes it unique and extremely popular, even in today's age of global digital photography.

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