

“ H a s t a L u e g o darkroom ”



HASTA LUEGO ©Pedro Meyer 1974

When I started in photography in the early fifties, we used to buy bulk film among a group of friends so that we could afford to buy the entire can with the equivalent of about 20 rolls of film, at a much cheaper price. The problem with loading one's own film in recycled canisters, was that such a solution all too often scratched the film. No matter how much one took care in avoiding this, somehow those miserable dark streaks running across the entire roll of film would rear their ugly head, ruining all the images in the process. Not only that, but we also had to deal with the inevitable light leaks on to the film; and those almost useless counters on the bulk film loader were never precise, so one would end up with an uncertain number of available film frames per roll. That always led one to discover that the film ran out at the worst possible moment. I neglected to say; the film used was always black and white.

Black and white photography was widely used throughout the world, less for any alleged artistic esthetics as for reduced costs. Not only was such film cheaper, but also periodicals, books and dailies were produced in black and white for economical reasons. Obviously making black and white photographic prints was also much cheaper per sheet of paper. Chemicals and all the darkroom accessories were simpler and easier to use than the comparable options for color photography.

For most of my career, I only photographed in black and white. With an eye for costs being the main reason for doing so. Color was essentially a luxury that few could afford. As time moved on the use of color became more accessible in direct relation to its reduction in costs, but by then esthetics of black and white photography had taken hold, and one would find the abstraction offered by a black and white image to be a lot more appropriate, for certain topics, than an equivalent image in color.

For years, one would hear comments such as “a really artistic photograph is made in black and white”. There was this prejudice in favor of black and white photography as being the real thing, so when it came to passing judgment if an image was artistic or not, the reference was that black and white equaled high esthetics (as in high art).

It is strange how an economic reality became such an intense definer for what passed as high art. The fact that the photographers used black and white materials out of necessity and not necessarily choice, has hardly ever been discussed.

However, now that the digital age has arrived, things are changing very rapidly. For starters, the cost for a color or black and white image is the same. Digital cameras are being built with the choice (b&w or color) built-in to the camera itself, so that the photographer can select if the image is to be in one or the other of these options. One can take this matter even further, in programs such as Photoshop; you can turn a color picture into a black and white image after having taken it, while retaining all the levels of color, only the appearance changes. You can print digitally as a black and white image, or as a color image, which is in gray scale colors. It all comes down to your esthetic preferences.

Therefore, for the first time, one can conclude that black and white imagery is really going to be made out of choice and not out of an economic necessity. Furthermore, the photographer still has the option even after having made the image in color, to then review it in black and white and define which looks best according to his personal values.

We are still at a stage, judging by the vast numbers of photographers who grace our pages in ZoneZero whose work stems from images done on film, that the stage for working with digital cameras has yet to come. Understandably, the process is gradual. However, that does not preclude that those photographic archives made on film, have to be printed in an analog fashion as well. The numbers of those scanning pictures from film, as a first step towards the digital world, is clearly on the rise and in large numbers.

However, there are those who cling to the black and white print on photographic paper as if it were a religious matter. To them, let me suggest you give yourself the opportunity to look at black and white prints made with ink jet printers on some of the most luscious cotton papers, that no photographic paper would be able to match. Placed next to each other, I tell you the ink jet prints are going to take it all away, when everything is said and done. They will be longer lasting than silver prints, the papers from which to select will be more abundant, the images can have a tonal range that puts photographic paper into a very tough bind, even those images made by the best of analog printers.

Furthermore, let me tell you, that after nearly thirty years, some of my negatives are being brought back to life through digital means that had been stashed away because of all their scratches from the bulk loading I told you earlier or other problems derived from being poorly archived. Some real beauties that were, for all intents and purposes unusable have

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