

FILM IS NOT DEAD!

WHY ANALOGUE PHOTOGRAPHY PREVAILS IN THE DIGITAL AGE



PHOTO: DANI BACON

LIGHTS, FILM CAMERA, ACTION! NATIONAL CAMERA DAY (JUNE 29TH) IS NOW CELEBRATED AS A NOD TO OUR SLEEK DIGITAL COMPANIONS—BUT THESE DAYS, YOU’RE JUST AS LIKELY TO SEE SOMEONE LOADING A ROLL OF KODAK GOLD INTO A THRIFTED CANON AE-1. FILM PHOTOGRAPHY, FAR FROM A RELIC, IS ENJOYING A STRIKING RESURGENCE AKIN TO VINYL, PARTICULARLY AMONG GEN Z. AND IT’S NOT JUST NOSTALGIA DRIVING THE TREND.

Analogue photography was once the only form of capturing a moment. For a century this incredible medium that used light and chemicals to freeze time, was something everyone used. But as technology advanced and digital cameras were born, film photography took a back foot, becoming a memory in itself. But according to the industry, film photography is back on the rise and it’s showing no sign of slowing.

The first roll of film on transparent plastic was invented in 1888 by a chap named George Eastman who also introduced the first Kodak #1 camera in the same year. This way of shooting made photography accessible to the masses. Throughout the next century or so, analogue photography enabled people to capture snapshots of their lives, record moving image and take beautiful photographs for an array of uses.

In 1975 Kodak once again broke through the barriers of invention by producing the world’s first digital and portable camera. However, it wasn’t until 1990 when these pixel capturers started to become more widely available for the public to buy on the market.

As digital cameras grew in popularity and technical ability over the next 25 years, analogue photography began to disappear. “Film photography died a death; nobody was interested in it. It was all about digital and how quick, easy and accessible it was.” Explains Hannah Brown, 44, marketing manager at Lomography UK.

Today almost anyone can feel like a pro photographer, with the vast majority of people carrying incredibly powerful smartphone cameras in their pockets. Serious shooters and professionals can find hi-res digital SLRs from brands such as Hasselblad, Fujifilm and Phase One that pack a whopping 150MP (mega pixels), which some may suggest is a little overkill.

But now the industry is seeing a shift, film photography is experiencing a revival. “Six or seven years ago, there was a period where film photography, it wasn’t used, it wasn’t considered. Just nobody was interested at all, and that’s now changed massively,” says Brown, “People’s attitudes towards film are changing. We’ve seen film photography come back into the forefront of people’s minds.”

“It’s coming back into the mainstream and we’re seeing that film aesthetic in advertising, on record covers, in magazines, in

brands and on social media. The shift is huge, and it’s kind of similar to what’s been happening with the vinyl revival, and the younger generation are wanting to explore older processes that are more tactile and physical.”

How do we know film is making a comeback?

Let’s look at some evidence. HARMAN, the company that produces Ilford and Kentmere film, ran a survey in late 2024 which had 14,340 responses (The previous survey 2 years before had 8,600). It found that 35% of respondents had been shooting film for less than 3 years and 71% said they had shot more film in 2024 than in the previous year.

But it seems this rapid growth in film popularity owes a large portion of credit to the younger generations. The survey showed that 65% of the respondents were under 45 with the main spike in the 25-34 age category (32%). Matt Parry, head of marketing at HARMAN says: “I’ve been working at HARMAN technology for almost 9 years and film has been growing in popularity the entire time. There are a lot of young people using film and in many ways the resurgence that started a decade ago was really driven by a younger demographic.”

So, what is it that young people love about film?

“There is something satisfying about the analogue experience. Digital is great, it’s translating light to 1’s and 0’s and digital data. But film is atoms of silver, stored on a roll of plastic, and that’s pretty cool, to think I’m holding an echo of light inside my camera.” – Willow Hicks, aged 27.

“Digital photography is a visual representation of reality, film photography is a visual representation of a memory. I shoot film because it forces me to slow down. Digital is great for firing off shots left and right when you just need to cover something. Film, by design, doesn’t let you do that. It makes you consider more aspects of your scene, it makes you pay more attention to light.” – Tucker Fellows, aged 24.

Looking at the results from HARMAN’s 2024 film photography survey, Parry concludes, “Many love nostalgia and the tangible creative nature of film. Some are disillusioned with the ‘perfect’ nature of digital and enjoy the imperfections and challenges offered by film, as well as time away from the computer. Some



"I love shooting film because it forces me to slow down." - Tucker Fellows. Photo: Dani Bacon

love the additional creative opportunities afforded by developing their own film or printing. But also, many people just simply love the aesthetic offered by analogue."

At Lomography, Hannah Brown explains that the resurgence could be down to the creativity of film as opposed to digital cameras. "There's only so much you can do with pixels," she says, "Film has that tactile element, it's a physical process that you can see and touch and smell, which makes the whole process of film very fascinating. It's a way of being creative and being unique with photography."

Is film photography good for you?

"One of the reasons people love film, is that sort of backlash against the digital world and obsession. Yeah, digital's brilliant, okay, well it is for some things, but it's also terrible for mental health." Says 38-year-old Paul McKay, director of Analogue Wonderland, a UK based developing service, film and camera store.

In June 2024, Analogue Wonderland hosted a sold-out national photo walk held in 40 cities across the UK, with the aim to create a sense of community and bring people back into nature. "I think that analogue speaks to mindfulness, to mental health, to connecting with human beings and to being more grounded in your physical world," says McKay.

For young people, film cameras offer a break from the noise of the digital world. Unlike phones that are loaded with notifications and distractions, shooting analogue invites presence, patience, and time away from a screen.

For award winning professional photographer Craig

Fleming, film photography brings a sense of calm. "I love the process of film; it's still my hobby in a way as well as it's also my job. I'm analogue at heart, hate computers and wasting life sat in front of a screen. In my portraits I like to see the serene, the calm, I want the subject to slow down to my pace, so shooting film certainly helps."

Craig Fleming uses both film and digital to capture portraiture as seen in The Sunday Times, Los Angeles Times, The V&A and more. When capturing portraits, Fleming finds that his subjects light up with curiosity when seeing him holding his Mamiya RZ67 medium format camera, particularly due to its waist-level viewfinder. Although he still loves shooting digital, film cameras like his RZ67 offer the opportunity to slow down and connect more freely with his subjects.

"Analogue mediums seem to refuse to die, it's inherent in humans to want to connect to what we're creating, and film helps with that," he explains, "with digital you can tommy gun the shoot and still get the same shots, but you also run the risk of boring your subject to tears. Film is good for discipline in that way."

What are the negatives?

Despite the rapid growth in analogue users, film photography does have its challenges. The price of film has increased considerably over the past decade due to supply issues, shipping costs and evidently the higher demand. Developing prices are also at a high, costing around £12 per roll, without paying the extra for prints.

Still, businesses in the industry are looking at creative ways to tackle cost and accessibility. Lomography, for example, regularly releases fun, affordable cameras and experimental films, popular with younger audiences, along with at-home developing kits making analogue more accessible.

On top of costs, conversations are also taking place in the industry regarding sustainability. Most film cameras are being thrifted, which is great, but it's likely that the industry will need to find ways to become more environmentally conscious.

The future of film

Across the analogue industry and community, there's a shared optimism about the future: film photography is set to keep growing. As demand rises, we could see more film labs opening, darkrooms making a comeback, and a wider range of gear and accessories hitting the market.

This renewed interest is already sparking innovation. In summer 2024, Pentax launched the 17, a half-frame 35mm film camera and the first new release from a major brand in nearly two decades. Talking about the inspiration behind the Pentax 17, Adrian Uden, marketing manager for Pentax explains, "We noticed a trend, a demand and the shift in the market, especially among younger users and photographers, that are really interested in trying film and a kind of physical media. We have to think about the future of film, and the future of film is very much the younger generation."

In a world driven by speed and screens, film photography offers something refreshingly human, slowness, intention, creativity and surprise. Whether it's the thrill of waiting for a roll to develop or the joy of shooting with care, analogue photography isn't just surviving in the digital age, it's thriving. And as a new generation embraces its imperfections, its future looks anything but obsolete.

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Portraits of actor Bill Nighy taken on Mamiya RZ67. Photo: Craig Fleming