The Unlikely Survival of Black-and-White Films in the 21st Century

by Russell Calkins

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Introduction

Despite overwhelming reasons to the contrary, black-and-white films continue to succeed in the modern marketplace. Like a stubborn unappreciated sibling, the monochrome image stands firm in a stable niche in both the commercial and artistic world of the moving image. It seems the dominant image format of more than a century ago should have been replaced by now. In large part, it has been. The preponderance of the commercial market was overtaken by color reproduction between the late 1930s to the late 1960s, but stalled after this point. For the last forty years, the black-and-white and the color formats reached a stable equilibrium – albeit, a totally unequal domination. Nevertheless, color has been unable to completely eradicate its ancestor, despite being a notch forward on the evolutionary chain. It would be nice to think of these formats as kind brethren, respectful of each-other—coexisting like a peaceful family. But this seems antithetical to a cutthroat industry that eats its young. Every film and image competes voraciously for eyes and dollars, with producers seeking to parlay the latest technology to box-office success. Yet the black-and-white image continues to persist in this competitive and constantly changing market. The question is why? How has it thwarted extinction through seventy-five years in a hyper-competitive marketplace? What aspects of black-and-white have allowed it to persist despite the invention of new, and arguably, superior formats?

On a strictly formal basis, the black-and-white image visually appeals to viewers in a different way than color. The format promotes strong images. Evidence of this can be seen everywhere from billboards, to fashion photography, to portraits on comedy club walls. There exists a strong theoretical and practical argument for the use of black-and-white to clarify the voice of the artist. The monochrome image has the ability to emphasize form, and the formal
elements of the photograph, and is often favored for its simplicity. Due to the domination of the color image in the modern world, the monochrome image maintains a minority status, which it uses to its advantage. Black-and-white stands apart, and the choice to leave color behind almost always invites additional consideration. The monochrome images beg to be contemplated as art or as commemorative pieces contextualized in history. By virtue of swimming upstream, monochrome images gain added weight purely for their refusal to blend in when compared to the saturated deluge of the contemporary color image.

The invention of color in the 1920s and 1930s was slow to completely take hold of the commercial film market, taking decades. By contrast, the advance of sound dominated almost immediately. Enabling dialog swiftly killed the medium of the silent picture. But unlike the shift to sound pictures the complete transfer to color film required multiple technical advances and monetary investments, which caused it to progress slowly over multiple decades. Color and monochrome films coexisted from 1937 until the early 1960s. The length of this time period is crucial. Genres using the monochrome image imbued the black-and-white format with a certain cultural relevance. As a result, contemporary use of the medium would immediately take on inter-textual reference to these earlier genres. Forms such as Noir, and documentary existed almost exclusively in the monochrome world for an entire generation. As a result, the black-and-white image retains the potential to exploit a commercial niche that still persists today some 50 years after the budgetary restrictions faded, and nearly 75 years after technical advances allowed for color representation.

These factors play a large part in the ongoing commercial potential of black-and-white film. While the marketplace for these films is small, it is both surprisingly stable and economically relevant. At the end of the 1930s, the introduction of commercially marketed color films began a sea-change in viewer tastes. Color films grew to dominate the market over the next four decades, capturing more and more of the available screens and dollars. But in the 1970s and
1980s, the encroachment seems to stop, and the size of the monochrome marketplace has remained relatively stable, leaving a successful commercial avenue for the theatrical distribution of black-and-white films.

In the last decade, filmmakers have utilized the monochrome image for its inherent referential ties to established narrative cultural forms borne out of the long period of color and monochrome coexistence, its ability to exploit standards of commemoration built by the history of journalism and documentary, or its capacity to clarify the artistic voice of the filmmaker through strong visuals.

**The Stable Economic Marketplace**

The historical economic trend of color domination has been clearly established. One might assume—based on the continued success of the color image—that the market for black-and-white theatrical releases continues to shrink, until sometime in the near future where it would disappear altogether. Surprisingly, this appears to be untrue. In fact, size of the market appears to have plateaued and remained stable for the last thirty years.

In the 1960s, large parts of the release market remained black-and-white for budgetary reasons. However in 1967, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences eliminated the category for black-and-white cinematography, consolidating it with color films for a single cinematography award (IMDB). This move signaled a larger shift in industry expectation, assuming black-and-white features would no longer be released by major studios. However, in the 1970s, some films produced in black-and-white continued to experience wide box-office success. Peter Bogdanovich’s *Last Picture Show* (1971) earned $29 Million as the first black-and-white feature released by a major studio in five years (Bogdanovich 14). His subsequent feature *Paper Moon* (1973) was equally successful in monochrome with four Oscar Nominations, and one statue for the young Tatum O’Neal, to accompany box-office success.
In the second half of the decade, David Lynch’s *Eraserhead* (1976) and Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* (1979) both proved to be solid box-office hits. Nevertheless, these successes were viewed as anomalies in the format’s steady and eventual decline.

A comparison of the number of black-and-white films that have grossed over one million dollars—a figure that eliminates financially insignificant films—in the last three decades yields surprising result.

In the 1980s, fourteen black-and-white films earned more than a million dollars at the domestic box-office (Table 1). These films spread across a number of different categories and genres. Building off the success of *Manhattan* (1979), Woody Allen accounted for three of them — *Zelig* (1981), *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) and *Stardust Memories* (1980) — but he was joined in the comedy genre by Carl Reiner and his *Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid* (1982). David Lynch continued working in the medium for *Elephant Man* (1980), and Martin Scorsese picked the format for his boxer biopic *Raging Bull* (1980).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Box-office</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Elephant Man</em></td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>David Lynch</td>
<td>26.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Raging Bull</em></td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Martin Scorsese</td>
<td>23.334</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid</em></td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Carl Reiner</td>
<td>18.196</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Zelig</em></td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Woody Allen</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Broadway Danny Rose</em></td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Woody Allen</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Stardust Memories</em></td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Woody Allen</td>
<td>10.389</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Under the Cherry Moon</em></td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Prince</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>She’s Gotta Have It</em></td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Spike Lee</td>
<td>7.14</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>The State of Things</em></td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Wim Wenders</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Wings of Desire</em></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Wim Wenders</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Rumble Fish</em></td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Francis Ford Copolla</td>
<td>2.494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Stranger Than Paradise</em></td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Jim Jarmusch</td>
<td>2.436</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Down by Law</em></td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Jim Jarmusch</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Epidemic</em></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Lars von Trier</td>
<td>1.01</td>
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Table 1: Black-And-White films of the 1980s
comedies, to offbeat art-house indies. Steven Spielberg shattered all expectations with *Schindler’s List* (1993), grossing more than $300 million. Additionally, unlike the 1980s, studios started utilizing the format for films intended for a wide release. *American History X* and *Pleasantville*—both released in 1998—utilized the monochromatic image to depict a seismic shift in attitude and to divide time and era, respectively.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Box-Office</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schindler's List</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Spielberg</td>
<td>321.306</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pleasantville</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Gary Ross</td>
<td>49.805</td>
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<td>American History X</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Tony Kaye</td>
<td>23.875</td>
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<td>The General</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>John Boorman</td>
<td>10.214</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ed Wood</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Tim Burton</td>
<td>5.887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europa</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Lars von Trier</td>
<td>5.575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Woody Allen</td>
<td>5.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pi</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Darren Aronofsky</td>
<td>3.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Kevin Smith</td>
<td>3.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadows and Fog</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Woody Allen</td>
<td>2.735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go Fish</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Rose Troche</td>
<td>2.405</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Girl on the Bridge</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Patrice Leconte</td>
<td>1.708</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Tango Lesson</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Sally Potter</td>
<td>1.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kafka</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Steven Soderbergh</td>
<td>1.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead Man</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Jim Jarmusch</td>
<td>1.037</td>
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Table 2: Black-and-white Films of the 1990s

The stability of the last decade is even more surprising given the escalating production costs of black-and-white. Unlike the 1960s — when shooting in black-and-white was less expensive — in many cases in the last decade, the choice for black-and-white made productions more expensive. Both Haneke’s *White Ribbon* (2009), and the Coen’s *Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001) were contractually obligated to release color versions in foreign television markets (Holben 49). Both films were shot on color film stocks, and desaturated in post-production. Research and development of monochromatic film stock basically halted thirty years ago, and modern color film stocks of Kodak and Fuji offer much higher resolution, a much finer grain structure, and are much more sensitive to light than the comparative black-and-white options. Moreover, in search

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<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Box-office</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Sin City</em></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Robert Rodríguez</td>
<td>158.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Good Night, and Good Luck</em></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>George Clooney</td>
<td>54.641</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Memento</em></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Christopher Nolan</td>
<td>39.723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Persepolis</em></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Marjane Satrapi/</td>
<td>22.752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vincent Paronnaud</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The White Ribbon</em></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Michael Haneke</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Man Who Wasn’t There</em></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Joel Coen</td>
<td>18.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Control</em></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Anton Corbijn</td>
<td>8.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Coffee and Cigarettes</em></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Jim Jarmusch</td>
<td>7.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Good German</em></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Steven Soderbergh</td>
<td>5.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ten Canoes</em></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Rolf de Heer</td>
<td>3.36</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Renaissance</em></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Christian Volckman</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Notorious Bettie Page</em></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Mary Harron</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>In Search of a Midnight Kiss</em></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Alex Holdridge</td>
<td>1.29</td>
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Table 3: Black-and-White Films of the 2000s

Black-and-White Films in the 21st Century
of cost savings, much of the lower end of the industry continues to move toward digital cameras. With the exception of the highly stylized *Sin City* (2005), digital acquisition of the black-and-white image has yet to prove commercially viable. But in spite of escalating costs, the last decade still provided as many successful black-and-white releases as the two decades that preceded it.

Despite the escalating costs, filmmakers appear to be finding more and more reasons to utilize black-and-white in their storytelling. Whereas in the 1980s, it seems black-and-white production was still driven largely by cost factors, black-and-white movies of the last ten years such as *Good Night and Good Luck*, or *The Man Who Wasn’t There* would have been easier and cheaper to produce in color. Financing would have been easier to secure for a color release, and the films would have been easier to sell. Clearly there are factors now at work— independent of cost—driving filmmakers to choose black-and-white.

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**A Theoretical Argument for Black-And-White - Artistic Clarity**

A number of theoretical factors contribute to black-and-white film’s ability to deliver particularly strong image. The format offers a visual clarity, often muddled by the introduction of color.

Structural forms in monochromatic images are more clearly defined. Form — the graphical arrangement of shape and line — becomes paramount in the image. The artistic composition of structural elements imbues the image with meaning. A strong diagonal line can imply depth or division. Crowding the subject of the image to one side can imply isolation. Roundness of shape can give the image a completeness, or likewise truncating a circular form can leave the feeling of incompleteness. The possibilities are bounded only by the filmmaker’s imagination. Obviously these elements are also found within the color image, however the absence of color
heightens the intensity of the edges of shape and line, thus heightening the graphical impact of form.

Monochromaticism also heightens the appearance of texture. This effect gives the image a tactile quality that can transcend the plane of the image — often defining the image itself. The skin’s texture in a portrait — weathered or supple — seems to depict the intangible inner qualities of the subject. The jagged roughness of bark on a tree or the glass-like surface of a serene lake have the ability to control the tone of the image. Without subtle gradations of color, the image instead can use gradations of texture to imply transitions of space.

The third major element emphasized by monochromaticism is contrast. The image contains only the information of luminance the difference of which defines the metric of contrast. Image-makers will often use a brown eye-glass that monochromaticizes reality into sepia tones in order to better observe the contrast results they will achieve in a black-and-white image. Given that artist can better perceive contrast with a monochromatic view, it also follows that many choose the black-and-white medium to maximize the display of contrast.

Use of contrast also allows the author to guide the focus of the viewer. This can be done in a number of ways. Biologically, the human eye is drawn to the brightest area of the frame. When composing a frame, the photographer or cinematographer will often ensure the most important elements in the frame are brightest or best lit. Additionally the eye is drawn to local areas of high contrast — areas where light and dark are juxtaposed against each-other. For example, features of the face such as the eyes or the mouth gain immediate attention in part due to their lines of contrast against the relative flatness of the surrounding skin. A black silhouette against a white background will draw the eye as well. Image-makers use these elements to guide the eye of the viewer to the elements they want to highlight.

The introduction of color can obfuscate these artistic intentions, and lead the viewer to overlook the artistic input of the person composing the frame. The increased information of the
According to many theorists, the muting of the artistic voice can be mitigated with a black-and-white image. In his book, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Vilem Flusser compares the color image to the black-and-white image, and finds the latter highlights artistic intent. He writes, “black and white photographs are more concrete and in this sense more true: they reveal their theoretical origin more clearly, and vice versa: The ‘more genuine’ the colours of the photograph become, the more untruthful they are, the more they conceal their theoretical origin” (Flusser 44). Without color, composition of shape, line, texture, and contrast are freed from their immediate relationship to reality. In Flusser’s view, the artist (or photographer)
derives meaning though these formal elements, and color only serves to muddy their message. The most interesting word from Flusser’s statement above is ‘true’. This sense of purity and honesty refers specifically to the artist intent. In his book Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes echoes this feeling of an underlying purity when he writes, “I have always felt color is a coating applied later on to the original truth of the black and white photograph” (81). The truth of the image is not tangible, but is created through the relationship or construction of different elements within the frame. Flusser does not refer to the elements themselves, but rather the choices made by the artist in their arrangement in order to create meaning. This truth is ephemeral, and exists only within the mind. Flusser emphasizes this point when he writes, “Many photographers therefore also prefer black-and-white photographs to color photographs because they more clearly reveal the actual significance of the photograph, i.e. the world of concepts” (43). Photographers articulate their world of concepts through the manipulation of physical objects. Black-And-White images downplay the role of objects as indexical symbols by divorcing them further from reality. Instead, the monochromatic image emphasizes an object’s iconic and symbolic reference to articulate non-tangible concepts. In other words, in the monochromatic world it becomes less important that the object actually existed and more important what the object refers to and what the arrangement symbolizes. Proof of the objects existence is better served by the color image.

The potential for artistic clarity is not only trumpeted by theorists and writers, but by working cinematographers as well. In a 2001 interview with American Cinematographer, seven-time Oscar nominee for cinematography Roger Deakins ASC BSC said, “All too often, color can be a distraction — it’s easier to make color look good, but harder to make color service the story” (49). As a formal element, color can be harder to control. Very few artists use it with the same artistic rigor as elements like shape, line, and shadow. Within the profession of cinematography, Vittorio Storaro is revered as a legend for his careful implementation of color
scheme. But his films like *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Reds* (1981), and *The Last Emperor* (1987) prove to be the exception rather than the rule. Storaro is constantly cited as one of the few artisans who truly exploits the potential of color as a formal system. Even within his own astounding four decades of work, Storaro admits he concentrated on the separation and control of color for only the period from 1979 to 1987 (Storaro 4). Roger Deakins emphasizes this point — echoing the words of Flusser and Barthes — when he says “Color is seductive, but it’s harder to get past the surface gloss to create a truly simple and relevant image. I almost wish every film were in black and white.” (49).

As a format, black-and-white offers the chance for a cleaner image emphasizing artistic clarity. The allure of this opportunity and the rarity of modern large-scale black-and-white productions draw in some of the greatest living cinematographers to these meager productions. Januz Kaminsky, Wally Pfister, Roger Deakins, Robert Elswit, Sven Nykvist, and Robby Muller have dozens of Academy Award Nominations between them, and have all been drawn to large black-and-white productions over the last two decades. These rare productions offer a chance for critical praise — as many of these black-and-white productions have been well-received. Part of this critical recognition derives from black-and-white’s minority status; swimming upstream has its advantages.

**The Artistic Advantage of Difference**

What is to be gained from minority status? Perhaps something can be learned from another format where color and monochrome images continue to coexist — the magazine. Now that the vast majority of images arrive fully saturated, perhaps by virtue of its difference the monochrome image has captured the signifier of “special”. When Paul Grainge investigated the escalating importance of black-and-white images in *TIME* magazine in the 1990s, he identified
this exact trend (Grainge 385). Black-and-white and color images coexisted in TIME for many
decades, but according to Grainge, the shift in signification took place in 1985 when TIME
began printing the domestic issue in full color. Before this point, color signified something
special: the cover, a lead portrait, or a special expensive advertisement. After 1985, the entire
magazine appeared in color. Over the course of the next decade it was the monochrome image
that took on special meaning. He writes, “There has been a transfer of visual signification. If
colour was at one time the carrier of impact and meaning, black-and-white has usurped this
role” (385). By the early nineties black-and-white photos carried the weight of history. When
Princess Diana died, TIME ran two successive covers with her portrait. The first was in color,
reading “Special Report”; the second in Black-and-white sold as a “Commemorative
Issue” (Grainge 387). The monochrome image carried special weight, and begged for
contemplation, to consider events in a larger context.

The minority status of the monochrome image gives black-and-white films the same caché
— the promise of substance under the surface. The bold choice to shoot a contemporary film in
black-and-white begs for additional artistic consideration. It nearly always works — merely by
virtue of their lack of color, black-and-white films are almost always considered artistic, or art
films. Kevin Smith’s Clerks (1994) is anything but an art film, but ran almost exclusively in art-
house theaters in its limited release. Distribution companies completely mis-categorized it,
simply because they assumed black-and-white films appeal only to an audience looking to
appreciate art. If this perception can raise a low-brow comedy into a work of art, consider what
effect it had on a thoughtful work like the Coen Brothers Man Who Wasn’t There (2001), or Jim
Jarmusch’s Coffee and Cigarettes (2003). In the contemporary marketplace of independent
production, artists parlay critical reception into marketability and profit potential through the
festival circuit. Artistic caché is crucial for an extended festival run, which ultimately enables the
sale of the film for theatrical distribution.
In an interview with Playboy in 2001, the Coen Brothers articulate this relationship between black-and-white, critical reception, and earning potential for their film *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001). As they often do, they find truth through comedy:

Ethan Coen: Comedy in general doesn’t get invited on [the festival awards] circuit

Joel Coen: On the other hand, we knew that *The Man Who Wasn’t There* would be invited to Cannes, where it won a big prize.

Ethan: It’s in black-and-white

Joel: Black-and-white invites prizes

Ethan: Especially from the French. (Coen 169)

In the interview, the Coens claim that they don’t care about awards or prizes, but attend competitions for the publicity value. The free exposure from festival awards in part supports the disadvantaged publicity budget. Box office success in turn allows artist like the Coens to make more movies. In a marketplace that commoditizes nearly everything, artistic merit has monetary value—whether the merit is perceived or real. Black-and-white production adds a perceived artistic merit, and just as the Coens claim, “invites prizes...especially from the French”. More than anything, the contemporary monochrome image asks to be appreciated as art, while giving the tools to convey artistic meaning clearly.

The Birth of Links Between Black-and-White and Cultural forms.

The coexistence of black-and-white and color films from the 1930s to the 1960s established stable niches within the cultural consciousness for the monochrome image. Unlike the introduction of sound, which almost entirely eliminated silent film production over the period of a few years, the introduction of color took much longer to totally dominate the medium of
commercial film. A number of monetary, technical, and artistic factors slowed the color takeover sufficiently for the roots of the black-and-white image to take hold.

As a commercial industry, the color medium in the late 1930s proved to be a huge draw. 1939’s *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* smashed box office expectations, and still rank as some of the most profitable films of all time. However, the three-strip Technicolor process used to create the fabulous new color films also proved to be hugely expensive.

While one would expect studios to record color movies on color film stock, in the early years of color production this was not the case. Instead the Technicolor used a prism to split the image onto three black-and-white film strips, each with their own color filter (hence the name “three-strip Technicolor). The colors would then be recombined in a complicated and expensive dye printing process, and released on a color film stock.

While magical and vibrant colors appeared on the screen, this process multiplied film costs. Producers required at least triple the film to shoot, and printing costs escalated astronomically. Additionally, the cameras were much larger and more expensive, which meant all support systems needed to scale up. Overall, the *Wizard of Oz (1939)* cost approximately $2.75 million and *Gone with the Wind (1939)* cost $3.9 million, whereas contemporary black-and-white productions such as Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)* cost $1.9 million and John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath (1940)* cost a meager $750 thousand (Box Office Mojo). Clearly not all productions justified the massive increase in expenditure.

While the takeover of color production took three decades to complete, the move was not fluid or gradual — the onslaught of Technicolor production invaded the marketplace in discrete steps. Films compete in the market as a whole, but they also compete in sub-markets defined by genre. One by one, genres and sub-markets fell to color domination. *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* established a new standard of consumer expectation, piercing fantasy and epic genres; musicals and adventure films would be next. Film historian David Bordwell
notes, “Hollywood’s use of Technicolor was almost entirely motivated by genre…Technicolor was identified with the musical comedy, the historical epic, the adventure story, and the fantasy — in short, the genres of stylization and spectacle” (355). By 1952, Eastman Kodak largely supplanted Technicolor as Hollywood’s color medium of choice. Eastman debuted a single color film stock sensitive enough for general production, eliminating the need for Technicolor’s costly three-strip process and gigantic cameras. Westerns proved relatively stubborn to the hyper-real colors of Technicolor, and although a few examples emerged in the late 40s (Duel in the Sun (1946), She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949)), the genre didn’t largely succumb to color until the Eastman color introduction in the early 1950s with *Shane* (1953) and *The Searchers* (1956).

The most persistent genres—genres that held out into the late 50s until production cost difference largely disappeared—were thrillers, and Film Noir.

Black-and-white suited thrillers and Noir of the 1940s and 50s for a very important reason — darkness. Along with cost factors, color production required multiple times as much light. “By 1948, a cinematographer could still point out that for low-key filming, color required ten lighting units for every two used in black-and-white, and that changes in light intensity affected not only exposure but color gradations, often for the worse” (Bordwell 356). The amount of lighting setup required for color production made it extremely difficult to retain darkness in shadows. The huge sources of light would spill from the area of interest, illuminating those spaces Noir or thriller films would prefer to remain obscured. According to Noir historians Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn, the dark stormy urban streets of *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) or *An American in Paris* (1951)
look “absolutely delightful” (127) (Figure 1). Compare that cheery shadow to the dark menacing spaces of Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944) or Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil* (1958) (Figure 2). The bold saturated colors and bright even lights undercut the portrayal of the urban crime drama. Evil could hardly lurk in the shadows if there were no real shadows to be found.

The big lights of color production had another effect as well — they required artificial staging and thicker make-up that further divorced the image from reality. Bordwell classifies the specific genres initially overcome by Technicolor as those that relied on “stylization and spectacle” (355). The absurdly bright lights required for color production led companies like Technicolor to market their own brands of thick makeup, and power requirements necessitated huge sound stages and power grids. Watch a few of these 1940s spectacles and they all share...
a manufactured look, totally divorced from reality. Proper exposure of the film negative was only possible under these very controlled and specific circumstances. Therefore, color production isolated filmmakers from interacting with the real world outside the studio.

Black-and-white film stock possessed the sensitivity to allow filmmakers to travel outside the studio gates to interact with the world as it was. Paradoxically, color representation should allow a more accurate representation of reality, but the opposite proved true in the post-second world war production period. Italian’s struck upon these factors with their neo-realism movement — shot almost exclusively in black-and-white. The black-and-white camera was lighter and portable compared to the Technicolor camera that weighed hundreds of pounds and stood as tall as the operator (Figure 3). Crews moved the Technicolor cameras with hydraulics and mechanical lifts. Conversely, breakthrough designs like the Arri 35 in 1937, allowed war correspondents to carry 35mm cameras hand-held through the battles of World War II. The update of the design, the Arri 35II in 1953, weighed scarcely more than 15 pounds (13.5 lbs with magazine, without film or lens) (ASC 497). Newsreels demanded the monochrome format for cost, lighting flexibility and portability. Even after Eastman Kodak started releasing useable
color negatives in the early 50s, removing the portability advantage, black-and-white still dominated all news-gathering and photojournalism for the next three decades.

Print media relied almost exclusively on the monochromatic image through to the early 1980s, for both the advantages of gathering and controlling the costs of printing. *USA Today* began a color formatted front page in 1982, Time Magazine did not shift to a full color format until 1985, and the New York Times first printed a color front-page image in 1997 (Grainge 385; NY Times). These changes leave at least a 50 year gap between the introduction of Kodak’s Kodachrome in 1935 — where color images were readily available and consumed — and the 1980s when print began to move en-masse to the color format. This gap established the black-and-white image as the de-facto format of historical documentation — the format that placed current events in a historical context.

These cost concerns extended to nearly everyone working outside the studio systems until the late 1960s. This included the groundbreaking work of Bergman, Fellini, Godard, Truffaut, and others. American distribution of these foreign films cemented black-and-white (along with subtitles) as an indicator of the art film. This classification largely remains today.

1950s and 1960s viewers association of black-and-white to newsreels and documentary film production as well. Groundbreaking work by Cinema Verité and Direct Cinema documentaries captured the world of the 1950s and 1960s almost exclusively in black-and-white. The cost of color film stocks was just too high for a Verité production like *Salesman* (1967), following Bible salesmen through the south. Filmmakers used these story forms to try to interface directly with reality. Small crews, no scripts, and unobtrusive setups were used to affect reality as little as possible while capturing it. The filmmakers search for truth intertwined with the medium. While the black-and-white image had little to do with the actual form outside of cost constraints, soon the shaky handheld monochromatic image became associated with the honest attempt of documentation. The resultant form referred to the original intention of the filmmakers. The
flexibility of small or non-existent lighting setups and cheap film stock allowed an unfiltered access to the real world. Soon, consumers and filmgoers associated that look with the search for truth, and imbued those intentions onto any story carrying the stripped down properties of black-and-white documentary.

The Cultural Connection of Form

Regardless of the factors that lead certain genres industries to the black-and-white image, the result of each of these partnerships was the same: a marriage between the monochromatic image and the underlying culture that used it. The consistent use of one type of image creates a link that works both ways. The artist uses the image to convey an idea or a group of ideas, and over time that type of image refers back to that group of ideas with or without the presence of the initial artist. The image or image system is coded, imbedded with these ideas. The form itself serves as a large metonym — a culturally understood link between a signifier (an image or image system) and a signified (a group of ideas). This mechanism defines the creation of culturally relevant form. Each of these forms — genres like film Noir, widespread like photojournalism portraits, or techniques like handheld shaky cameras — became a mode of representation that inherently contains both the image form as well as the represented cultural values as a package.

After the mode has been codified and recognized, it becomes difficult to use the image type without evoking to the culture it came from. This is true with all cultural forms, large and small. It is impossible to write a sonnet without referring in some way to Shakespeare. A horizontal wipe transition in a modern action movie refers to Star Wars (1977), or a slow-motion shot of five well-dressed men walking down an alley refers to the themes of Reservoir Dogs (1992). The more successful and widespread the form is, the stronger the link back to underlying ideas.
The link back to Shakespeare will be more pronounced and inescapable than the link to George Lucas or Quentin Tarentino, but the mechanism works the same way. The Coen Brothers know black-and-white films garner additional praise from the French, in part because the monochrome image refers to the French New Wave. The strength of these links depends on the success of the form, and in the film industry that success is usually defined by economic profitability.

In film, these modes of representation develop organically because they emerge out of an economic system. In the western culture industry, the public is the ultimate decider of success. They vote with their dollars. Under most circumstances, individuals are not even aware they are voting. They merely consume media that resonates with them in some way. The combination of value set and image system often fails, but when it succeeds competitors immediately imitate it. Imitators need not know why the combination works, only that it does work. Often imitators are as clueless as consumers, but both churn the economic engine that spreads and solidifies cultural form.

Once these modes of representation are widespread and culturally codified, the systems are ripe for artistic exploitation. They serve as a referential shorthand to relay ideas quickly and efficiently. By the use of a single shot, a filmmaker can refer to a sea of ideas already associated with the form. Or in the case of black-and-white films, a filmmaker can operate within a system of understood expectations and values.

The contemporary filmmaker’s choice to shoot in black-and-white immediately grounds their work in an older form, but the ideas and values that created that form are not outdated at all. In fact, they may be very topical and relevant to current events and attitudes. The directors who have chosen to make black-and-white films in the last decade have found success as they exploited these forms. The black-and-white image itself is not necessarily a form, but instead has a number of subcategories useful for contemporary work. Each specific sub-category can
relate to a different set of values that relate to the underlying conditions behind the genre formation.

**Three Examples From the 2000s**

Three black-and-white films from the last decade illuminate the potential success of using the monochrome image to capitalize on the values of older forms. Each film enjoyed success, both financially and artistically, but they accomplished it in different ways. Each film tapped into a different niche carved out by the monochrome image, demonstrating both the flexibility of the approach and the potential for variety. They use the black-and-white image as a tool to further their artistic goals, not as an end goal in-of-itself.


In 2001 the Coen Brothers released a hard-boiled Noir made for the new century. *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) stars Billy Bob Thornton as Ed Crane, a nearly silent barber in 1949, who blackmails his wife’s lover for $10,000 to improve his life. Everything goes wrong, and true to Noir tradition, almost all the principal players end up incarcerated or deceased. The Coens chose the black-and-white format, which allowed them to immediately tap into the social attitudes underneath the Noir tradition.

Speaking about the film, Director Joel Coen said, “for a lot of intangible reasons that aren't easy to explain, it seemed as if black-and-white was appropriate for this story” (Holben 49). Perhaps Joel has a difficult time explaining the reasons because the genre of Noir is famously difficult to nail down. “It has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term”, offers James Naremore in his *Film Quarterly* essay, “American Film Noir: The History of an Idea.” The amorphous genre can include crime dramas, femme fatales, detectives, murder, grifters and a host of other narrative elements, but few of these elements are able to establish.
the genre space from the opening shot. As Naremore indicates, Noir is easier to show than to talk about. Inhabiting a genre fifty years after it faded away makes the task particularly difficult. The black-and-white image combined with the low gravel of Thornton’s voiceover establish immediate hallmarks of the genre, and immediately reference the side-lit offices and opening monologues of Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade.

Joel Coen goes on to say, “It’s a period movie, and black-and-white helps with the feeling for the period. Black-and-white is evocative for a story like this [in ways] that color photography isn’t” (Holben 49). The “period” for this film is not simply the year 1949, but instead everything that is wrapped up in the feelings and underlying tensions of Film Noir. The feeling of the period is post war anxiety, a menacing danger lurking just under the surface, male inadequacy and undefined gender roles and responsibilities. The black-and-white image supports all of these elements in ways that perhaps the color image may struggle.

As discussed earlier, Noir thrives on darkness. Light indicates information, and is surrounded by danger lurking in the shadows. Perhaps nothing in The Man Who Wasn’t There illustrates this point better than the use of lamps as lighting components in critical scenes. The

Figure 4: Lamp on Big Dave’s Desk in The Man Who Wasn’t There
lamp on top of the piano or desk illuminates a small central area, casting a small pool of light. The surrounding area is left dark. The monochrome image elegantly separates these framings into that which can be seen, and that which cannot be seen. The light is not colored — it is not warm or cold — but instead it is pure information indicating what is known and what isn’t. In what cinematographer Roger Deakins calls his favorite scene (Silberg 57), a single desk lamp illuminates the murder scene in Big Dave’s office, concentrating attention on Dave and his bottle of bourbon (Figure 4). The shadows envelop Dave and build palatable tension as the dialog slowly crescendos to violence. The scene plays out as silhouettes struggling toward an

Figure 5: Lamp on Birdie’s Piano in *The Man Who Wasn’t There*

unknown resolution. Similarly, the use of a simple desk lamp on top of Birdie’s piano repeatedly focuses Crane’s attention on the teenage girl (Figure 5). The image surrounds her with darkness and danger. She is mysterious, alluring, and yet dangerous. The black-and-white image allows this duality of warmth and danger; a warm light would inappropriately categorize the scene, dampening the dangerous elements. A strong colored lamp, such as red, would turn the scene almost cartoonish. Instead, the frame relies on the ability to draw the eye to indicate attraction, while introducing the femme fatale shrouded in the danger of darkness.
Along constant danger and mystery lurking underneath the surface, the Coens also use the black-and-white image to exploit one of the key psychoanalytic components driving the genre of Noir: male inadequacy. Following World War II, men returned home to discover a society and economy that functioned without them. The image of Rosie the Riveter struck fear into the American male identity, questioning the need for traditional male roles. Ed Crane is the perfect example of this man. He works as second chair in a barbershop, whereas his wife keeps the books at a large department store, she provides the primary income for the family. He does not provide for his wife sexually, she finds sexual satisfaction with Big Dave. Furthermore, the Cranes don’t have any children. Ed Crane does not fit the role of provider, stud, or father. The Coens constantly depict him as boxed into this world where he supposedly “has it made” with his nice house and garbage grinder in the sink. The monochrome image presents strong lines and patterns that entrap him and limit his movement (Figure 6). The lines of doorways, or the patterns off venetian blinds confine him, and subtly depict a decadent duality — patterns of line
create beautiful scenes to look at, but also entrap and restrict the occupant of the frame (Figure 7). The monochrome image strengthens the edges of these shapes and patterns, and

Entrapped in the frame, the black-and-white image serves a tangible revealing function into Ed Crane’s character. The Coens define Crane through his relative inactivity, and yet the audience still gets the sense that they know him — they have access to the person under the surface. The monochrome image enables this revealing function, perhaps in superior way to the color image. In discussing portrait photography, Roger Rosenblatt argues that the black-and-white image “probes the inner life of things” (Grainge 384). Always popular for portrait photography, the clean images of Crane seem to access and illuminate his identity in spite of his inactivity. On the director’s commentary of the DVD, Thornton jokes that he didn’t do anything, he just sat there motionless and without emotion. Within *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, The Coen Brothers and their cameraman, Roger Deakins, use the monochrome image perfectly to

![Figure 7: Ed Crane in The Man Who Wasn’t There (2001)](image)

intensifies Crane’s relationship to the other elements in the frame.
access and exploit the tropes of the Noir genre. The elements of identity, male inadequacy, and obscured societal danger and instability still resonate strongly in the current decade, and the black-and-white images access these themes from an unconventional angle in the modern marketplace. Critics rewarded the refreshing artistic angle, as the film garnered dozens of awards for its cinematography. But the images were more than pretty to look at. As Joel Coen and Roger Deakins alluded to in their interviews about the film, the monochrome images elegantly articulated the themes of the story.

2. Good Night and Good Luck (2005)

Directed by George Clooney, Good Night and Good Luck (2005) uses black-and-white photography to tell the story of Edward Murrow set in 1953. Unlike the Coens in The Man Who Wasn’t There (2001), Clooney does not demand exactness in his camera setups and framings. He worked on this film primarily controlling the actors, and gave his cinematographer Robert Elswit freedom to move and capture moments as they unfolded. Moreover, the crew often shot with multiple cameras on long telephoto lenses, hunting the scene for compelling material. This approach almost eliminates the careful coordination of actor, shadow and line — all strengths of the black-and-white image. Nevertheless, the monochrome image proved perfect for this story. Clooney and Elswit use black-and-white tradition in a totally different way than the Coens homage to Noir. Instead of tapping into a preexisting film genre associated with black-and-white, like Noir or the thriller, they exploit a different established mode of representation — photojournalism. Clooney and Elswit base the visual style of the film on the logic of the 1950s magazine profiles from magazines such as Look and Life (Witmer 24).

This approach directly addresses the role of film to primarily investigate the notion of identity. Leo Braudy, in his book World in a Frame highlights the difference between the nature of theater and film, establishing that stage productions primarily concern themselves with social
interaction, whereas film (like the novel) investigates the inner workings of character (198). Film’s ability for intimate access to characters levies it with the responsibility to answer driving questions like “Who is Charles Foster Kane?” Good Night and Good Luck and the profile pieces of magazines like Look in the 50s follow the same logic. They use candid black-and-white photographs of individuals embedded in their worlds to investigate the essence of identity. Images from the film feel like they could have been pulled directly from pages of a 1953 profile (Figure 8).

The visual style of Good Night and Good Luck strings together portraits of men and women working in a tension filled 1953 television newsroom. It is observational and unobtrusive, using long lenses to provide close-ups from a comfortable perspective. It immediately recalls the style of magazine photojournalists and their range-finder cameras, shooting candid black-and-white photographs from their privileged behind-the-scenes perspectives (Witmer 24). Unlike most close-ups in contemporary films, these shots are true portraits. The subjects are not necessarily
talking — but listening, watching and contemplating (Figure 9). The shots are not about social

interaction, but the nature of the individual themselves independent of dialog. In fact, the resultant images seem to divorce the dialog track from the series of images, as if they act independently. This too mirrors the logic of the magazine profile. The words tell one story, offering context and plot. The images illuminate the individual, giving the viewer the access to know and understand them. The black-and-white format shines in this context, imbuing every image with both a historical weight and a documentary honesty.

The black-and-white image is particularly effective in historical portraiture. The black-and-white image invites the viewer to investigate Murrow in the same way as a presidential portrait. It promises substance under the surface, and requires the audience to use context to draw conclusions about the protagonist. In the same way as TIME ran a black-and-white image of Princess Diana to commemorate her death, the monochrome images of David Strathairn as Edward R. Murrow carry historical weight. The simplicity and contrast frames the man and

Figure 9: David Strathairn as Edward Murrow in Good Night and Good Luck (2005)
events of the story as historically important, critical to American history. This effect is even more pronounced in the contemporary era, where the vast majority of images are distributed in color. Compare the images of Murrow in *Good Night and Good Luck* to the color images of Nixon in *Frost/Nixon* (2008), and the monochrome depictions of Murrow carry an undeniable weight of history and introspection. In fact, the publicity materials for *Frost/Nixon* desaturate the image of Nixon to embellish his historic importance (Figure 10). The black-and-white format forces the events to be viewed within historical context, commemorating and canonizing brave actions of a newsman in 1953.


When Michael Haneke talked to his cinematographer, Christian Berger, about the look of his film *The White Ribbon* (2009), he primarily desired to “avoid any feeling of warmth or nostalgia, two qualities frequently associated with period pieces” (Oppenheimer 20). It seems contradictory then, that Haneke always envisioned the project in black-and-white. But his vision and style did not draw upon the forms of black-and-white images that evoke nostalgia. Instead Haneke drew inspiration from the unaffected anthropological style of 1920s German photographer August Sander, and the presentation of Ingmar Bergman and cameraman Sven Nykvist that stresses artistic distance (Williams 48, Oppenheimer 20). It is the modern sterility and analytical approach that keep the viewer at arms length, forcing them to contemplate the meaning of Haneke’s mise-en-scene, framings, and juxtapositions.
The idea of distance is critical to the appreciation of a piece of work as art, and is a vital component of what theorist Walter Benjamin calls an object’s “aura”. According to Benjamin, one definition of aura is the “unique phenomenon of a distance however close [the object] may be”, and that it retains an unapproachable quality regardless of the viewer’s perspective (Benjamin 132). Although Benjamin generally asserts that film collapses this distance, thus destroying the aura of a work or art, filmmakers such as Ingmar Bergman strive to recreate this unapproachability. Haneke co-opts the style of Bergman and collaborator Sven Nykvist from such films as Winter Light (1963) and Persona (1966), that forces the audience to consider the work as a piece of art. In an interview with Sight and Sound, Haneke said the decision to shoot in black-and-white was critical because “it reminds you it's not reality you're seeing but something artificial” (15). The black-and-white images of White Ribbon ground the piece in the genre of a mid-60s art film.

The black-and-white photography of White Ribbon presents the story without a hint of romanticism. Along with Bergman, Haneke identifies the photographic work of August Sander as a major influence on the style of depiction. Like Sander’s photographs (Figure 11), Haneke’s images sought truth through a stable form. Sander’s simple approach within a photographic convention.

![Figure 11: Example of Photographic work of August Sander: Children of Diren Home for the Blind. 1930-31.](image-url)
increased a sense of truth by inhibiting the feeling of authorship within the frame (Baker 82). Instead, Sander released his photographs in a small twelve image series, creating meaning through what he decided to include. Like Sander, Haneke also famously imbues his films with significance through what he does or does not include. But for Haneke, these decisions took place both in his careful naturalistic mise-en-scene, and in his omitted but implied violence. Haneke eschewed bold or aggressive camera angles, and instead crafted scenes simply in front of the camera. The clean and unaffected monochrome image gives the film the sense of Sander’s anthropological photography, and gives the feeling that Haneke is documenting a community (the film is subtitled “German Children’s Story”), as much as he is telling a straightforward narrative.

The perception of honesty in the monochrome image may have also affected the film’s reception. Haneke has often been labeled as particularly manipulative in his filmmaking. The perception of the black-and-white film as art more than entertainment resets the expectations of the potential audience. His manipulation is perhaps easier to accept when the image form promotes an analytical evaluation as much as an emotional one. Whether White Ribbon is Haneke’s best film is by no means clear, but it was certainly his best received by wide audience of critics, garnering the Best Foreign Film Nomination from the 2010 Academy Awards.

Conclusion

For a myriad of reasons — both aesthetic and monetary — the black-and-white format sank deep cultural roots into specific genres and forms. As a result, the use of black-and-white provides an elegant access to the sea of cultural values and issues underneath these forms. The monochrome image can refer to societal issues or concerns, can reset audience expectations, or can piggyback on generations of honest representation. These modes of
representation continue to hold power and efficacy in the contemporary world.

It appears as though the success of black-and-white films in contemporary times hinges on the filmmakers ability to exploit genres that enjoyed success in the period of monochrome and color coexistence. *The Man Who Wasn’t There, Good Night and Good Luck,* and *The White Ribbon* all target specific modes of representation from the 1940s to the 1960s with established and accepted rules and conventions. They all exploit those rules and cultural undertones to further their artistic themes.

Moving forward, as black-and-white production becomes more expensive, it will be interesting to see how budgetary restrictions inhibit black-and-white production in the same way it promoted the form in the 1940s.

Perhaps of more pressing interest is the longevity of these modes of representation in the cultural consciousness. The Coen Brothers closely relate to Noir from their fascination with the B-pictures of their youth in the late 1960s and 70s. George Clooney’s father was a newsman, and this personal contact was extraordinarily important as a point of connection to the subject matter of Journalism in the 1950s. Michel Haneke was born in 1942 (IMDB), and experienced the power of the interwar photography of August Sander and the artistic effect of the films of Ingmar Bergman first hand. Will the next generation of filmmakers feel the same connection to these modes of representation? Clearly the black-and-white image retains uncanny power for the creation of strong images. But that power seems wasted without the channeling effect of an established genre or format. Without the inter-textual power of reference, does black-and-white representation carry the same artistic draw? Perhaps future filmmakers will utilize contemporary implementations of the monochrome image in ways that have yet to be considered. This has certainly been the case with the recent adaptations of the graphic novel. The black-and-white format seems too powerful, and has too much artistic potential to fade completely. It has inexplicably survived in spite of overwhelming pressure for three quarters of a
century.
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