Kodachrome: An Ending

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All photos by the author

The longest-lived of camera films is about to end its 75-year history. The only laboratory that still processes Kodachrome, the first commercially available colour slide film, will stop doing so at the end of the year. Kodak progressively withdrew the film from sale between 2002 and 2009, though many photographers loved it enough to buy large stocks to keep in their freezers. Amateurs cannot develop Kodachrome, which requires a large number of carefully controlled treatments, so, with the closing down of the processing facility, the film is finished.

Kodachrome was, from its beginning in 1935, a distinct and remarkable film. It is made up of layers of black-and-white film which have sensitivity to different coloured light, and a series of filters. Only during processing are the appropriate dyes added to each layer to produce a colour transparency. Compared to other colour films, at least up until 1990 with the introduction of Fuji's garish Velvia, Kodachrome had unique advantages: its colours were rich and naturalistic,

its blacks did not have the greyish cast of so many colour films, its greys were subtle, it had remarkable contrast, and the lack of colour couplers between its layers (which tend to diffuse light) gave the film extraordinary sharpness.

Getting my first yellow box of processed Kodachrome 25 through the post in 1982, and holding the cardboard-mounted slides up to the window, is an experience I won't forget: the pictures were mundane—of our family home and pet cat—but I had no idea that a photograph could be so vivid, so rich in tonal range or so finely detailed. The mystery of these dark rectangles that sprang to life when backlit was further enhanced by the tiny and intricate engraving on their reverse side, visible when the slide was held in a raking light so that the contrasting lines of the image appeared in low relief.

'25' meant 25 ASA—a measurement of the film's sensitivity to light but also an indication of its resolution, since slow (insensitive) films tend to have the smallest grain and thus the greatest ability to render detail. Most general purpose films are at least quadruple the speed of this slowest and finest of Kodachromes which was meant for use in bright light. Kodachrome was often used in the spot-lit or flash-lit studio where its dark monochrome layer was banished by fields of flat, brilliant colour, but it was also used to record, under sun or leaden sky, in narrow bands of sharp focus and in muted colours, US farmers in the Great Depression, Nazi parades and the battlefields of World War II.

Kodachrome was for decades the film in which the colours of commerce were written. It reproduced more beautifully than any other film, and was a mainstay of the great illustrated magazines which, before colour television, were the most advanced arena for the visual

propagation of capitalist values. *National Geographic*, in particular, used Kodachrome to bring the world's exotica to its readers in millions of living rooms and waiting rooms. Steve McCurry, best known for his famous (and in some circles, infamous) 1985 *National Geographic* cover photograph of a girl in Afghanistan with striking green eyes, used Kodachrome for that shot, and for most of his work over 35 years. He arranged to shoot the last roll of the film to come off Kodak's production line and, piling elegy on elegy, used part of it to photograph members of a vanishing tribal people in Rajasthan.

Kodachrome is also, very largely, the surviving colour of interwar history, and of the next few decades. Kodak had produced a colour film of remarkable archival stability—and for a very long time, the *only* colour film capable of retaining its colours across generations. Kodachrome was a demanding film to use, requiring precise exposures that could only be achieved with a reasonably sophisticated camera and a skilled user. As Henry Wilhelm notes, Kodak, marketing more forgiving colour films to the mass market, had good reason not to boast of Kodachrome's durability, lest questions were asked about its other films. It kept the matter secret for forty years, by which time it was plain for all to see in the faded, yellowing ruins of all other colour pictures, and the remaining brilliance of Kodachrome if stored in the dark. This was an extraordinary act of corporate wrecking on the part of Kodak, in which other film manufacturers were complicit, since all kept the ephemerality of their colour films secret. The very point of photographs is as a visual peg against transience so Kodak's reticence was not only a vandalism of the historical record but a betrayal of the vast majority of its customers.

When I started to use the film, its stability was well known (and still unique), and was a strong consideration in choosing it: that the little rectangles into which I poured such labour would still

be readable in 50 or a 100 years' time. Equally, the commercial look of Kodachrome was also important for I was trying to turn the most advanced visual means of commerce against itself in recording the ruins of Thatcher's first recession—the boarded-up shop fronts, derelict workplaces and unswept streets. Outdoors, under gloomy British skies, Kodachrome's deep blacks—its shadow layer—became, with a touch of underexposure that also saturated the colours, wells of melancholy.

Should we mourn the passing of a commercial product, particularly one with such a mixed history? Most cultural work are made with such products. Duchamp pointed out that even paintings could be thought of as 'ready made', being mere reorganisations of material squeezed from off-the-shelf tubes. Just as it takes practice and time to learn how to use a camera or a lens, so it does to know how both will interact with a type of film. The technical conservatism of most professional photographers is purposeful, as they defend their hard-won knowledge, which is both mental and bodily (stored up in habitual actions): in what circumstances is a film best used, how does it bear detail in highlight and shadow, how does it behave in different lighting conditions? So the sharply cut end of Kodachrome may be regretted as an abrupt extinction of techniques, practices and knowledge. (Digital cameras, incidentally, are quite different, binding together the optics and mechanical elements of analogue cameras with a light-sensitive array which, alongside elaborate software processing, acts as a simulation of a remarkable range of film-like behaviour—fast and slow, warm and cool, colour and monochrome. Advanced cameras allow the user to precisely configure the colour temperature for which the virtual film is balanced along with the vividness of its colours and its sharpness. The effect is similar to the move to satellite and cable TV: much greater choice and with it a splintering of communities once formed by their shared consumption.)

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As I learned to use the film, Kodachrome's impenetrable darks came to represent for me the shadow world of brightly hued commerce, and a metaphor for all that commerce hid behind its adverts and shop displays: from environmental devastation and child labour to the dissipation of human potential in mechanical tasks. The green eyes of Sharbat Gula that Kodachrome via McCurry, rendered so strikingly, made the photographer rich and famous, as they stared out of the picture at it many viewers, as they continue to do. As she recalled the event years later, at the point of her 'rediscovery' by the photographer, it was the first time she had been photographed, and she looked at the intrusive camera in anger.

Scans of Julian Stallabrass' Kodachrome photographs can be seen on Flickr, especially in the sets 'Gargantua' and 'Anatomy of Photography'.