

IN THE DIGITAL AGE, WHY
WOULD YOU CONSIDER B&W
PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE
EFFECTS OF COLOUR FILTERS ON
THE FINAL B&W IMAGE:

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There are different schools of thought when it comes to black and white photography. Some believe it was a technical limitation of the past that people need to get over and move on. While others see it as a creative choice, that needs to be explored in great depths. As camera technology gets better, with more emphasis on improved colour ranges, why would you choose to shoot or process your images in black and white? We we'll look at reasons why you might want to shoot or convert your images to black and white.

B&W Helps you see differently

The old “Masters” of photography shot in black and white, because they had no choice. Even with the advent of Kodachrome, which introduced the world to colour photography, there was still a pursuance of black and white. This was because black and white was (and still is by some people) seen as photography in its the purest form. Ansel Adams, was a pioneer of dramatic mountain images using B&W Photography



When you remove colour, the emphasis shifts to the other compositional elements of the image. These include lines, shape and texture, contrasts and tones.

With this in mind, it is obvious that not all images will convert well to black and white. So, look at all the elements and deduce what else you have to work with, besides colour.

Many times black and white helps you develop a different perspective from what you are used to seeing, which nurtures your photographic eye.

B&W Eliminates distractions

We are used to seeing the world in colour and there nothing is wrong with that view. Sometimes this contributes to other elements or details being lost or taken for granted. Some of the elements required for a great photo include contrast, texture, lighting, shape, and form.



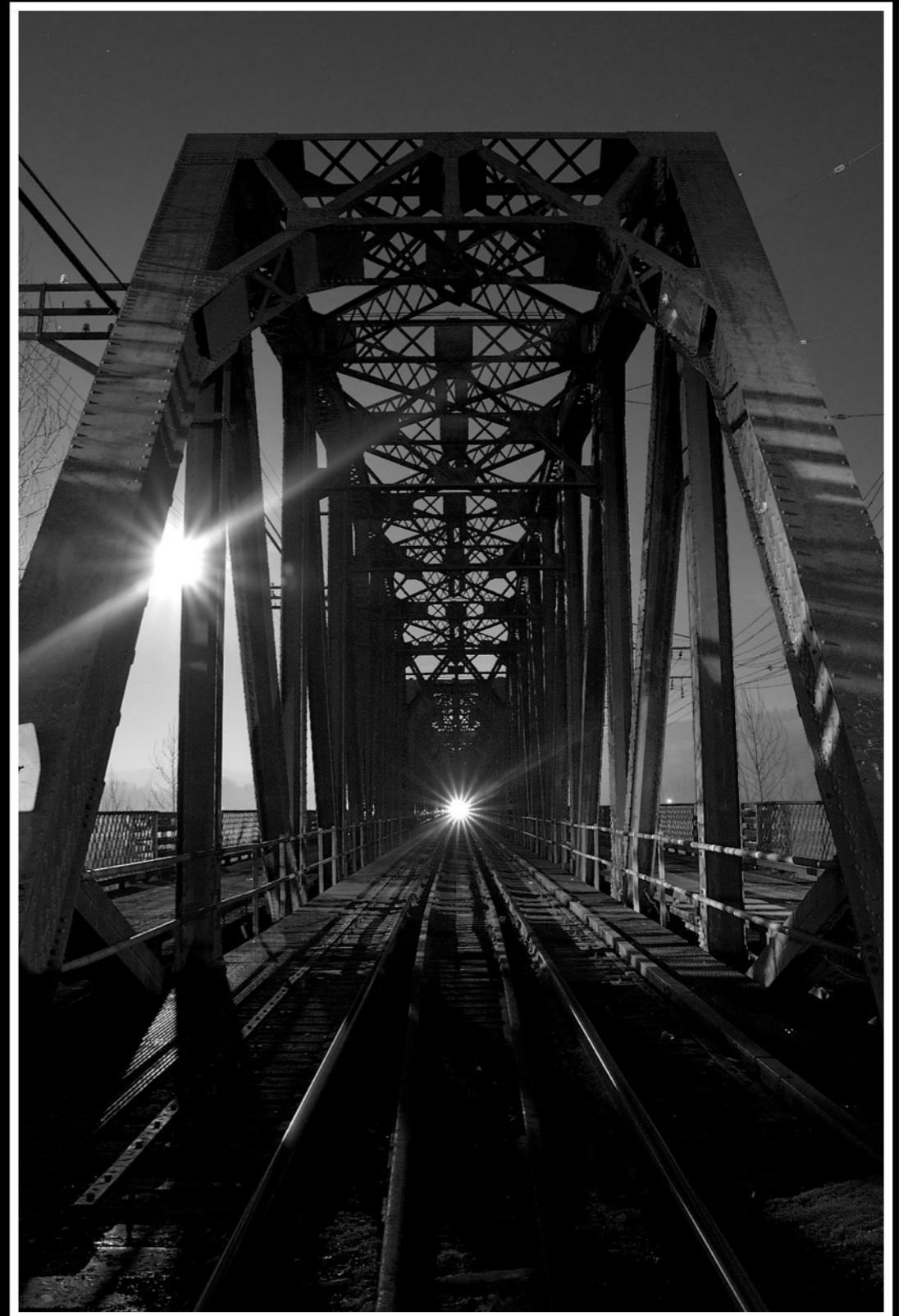
When you shoot for black and white, you challenge yourself to remove the distraction of colour. These include color casts and differences in colour temperature (ambient light sources), as well as specific colourful elements that are strong, which may reside in the background or take away from your story.

Monochromatic imagery forces you to focus on form, shape, and texture while composing. If your emphasis is on making colours work together, these elements are sometimes overlooked. With black and white, distracting colours are now translated into shades of grey that add to your image.

B&W Offers creative choice

Since your world is in colour, it is safe to say that colour photography depicts reality and is more realistic. Thus, black and white photography is viewed as a rendition of reality or how you interpret what you see.

When you remove colour, you not only isolate the different elements, you are compelled to find how they relate to each other. This helps you explore and create different ways to tell your story.



When you take away colour, you remove what your viewer is used to seeing. Now you are charged with finding the stronger elements in the scene and figuring out how to use them to convey what you want to depict.



Adds emotion or mood

Something about the variance of tonal ranges, rich blacks, and deep contrasts appeal to us psychologically. It creates a connection that makes you stop and pay attention to what is being presented.

Many photographers use black and white for storytelling in travel and street photography, as well as when portraying religious or cultural activities. Monochrome in some genres connects, enhances and strengthens emotions and mood.





Timelessness

Even though this is lower on the list, it is one of the more common reasons why some photographers shoot in black and white. Monochromatic photography adds what is seen as a timeless quality to your images.

Black and white photos seem to transcend reality and take you back to a time gone by. Historically there were colour schemes that were specific to types of film or trends in digital photography that can date your image. The removal of colour makes it tougher to figure out when the image was taken/produced.



Five colours filters that affect B&W photography:

Shooting in black and white can be an amazingly creative way to explore new areas of photography, and help you see not only your pictures, but the world around you in a whole new light. However, unless you are shooting with black and white film or with a dedicated black and white camera like the Leica M Monochrome, all your pictures will initially be shot in colour and later transformed into black and white through software tricks or digital filters.

All high end post production software has an impressive array of presets that allow you to apply black and white effects to your colour pictures, but in order to select the right filter for your particular pictures it's important to understand how these presets work behind the scenes, and what they are really doing to your photos.

Back in the days of film photography, black and white film was composed of a single layer of silver crystals that were sensitive to light and affected the film in different ways depending on the wavelength, or colour, of the incoming light. Green light (like reflected off of plants and trees) had a different effect on the film than red light (reflected off apples) or blue light (reflected off the sky).

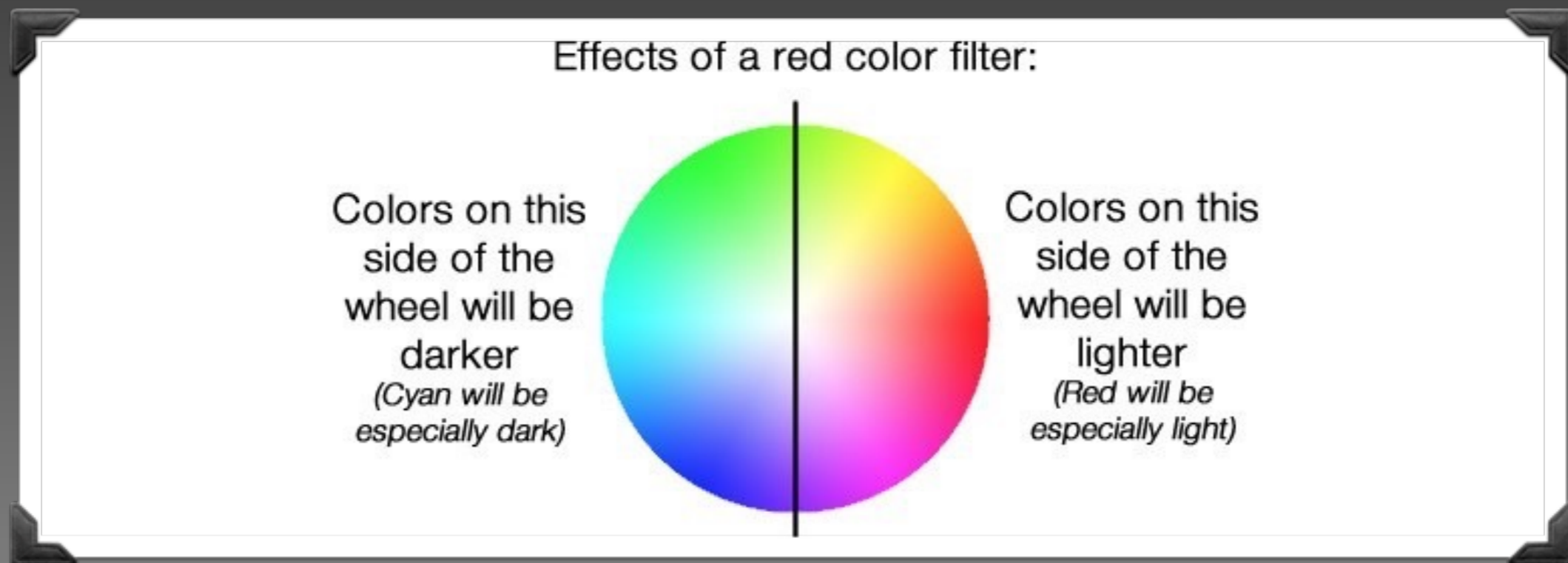
When colour film was invented it contained not one, but three layers of silver halide crystals, each of which produced different colours when exposed to light—similar to how the photosensitive pixels work on modern digital cameras. The problem with this method was that sometimes a photographer would need their film to be extra sensitive to different wavelengths of light, depending on the particular scene being photographed. One popular solution was to use coloured filters that screwed onto the front of the camera lens, which still left the resulting image monochrome but changed its properties in significant ways.

RED-GREEN-BLUE-ORANGE-YELLOW FILTERS

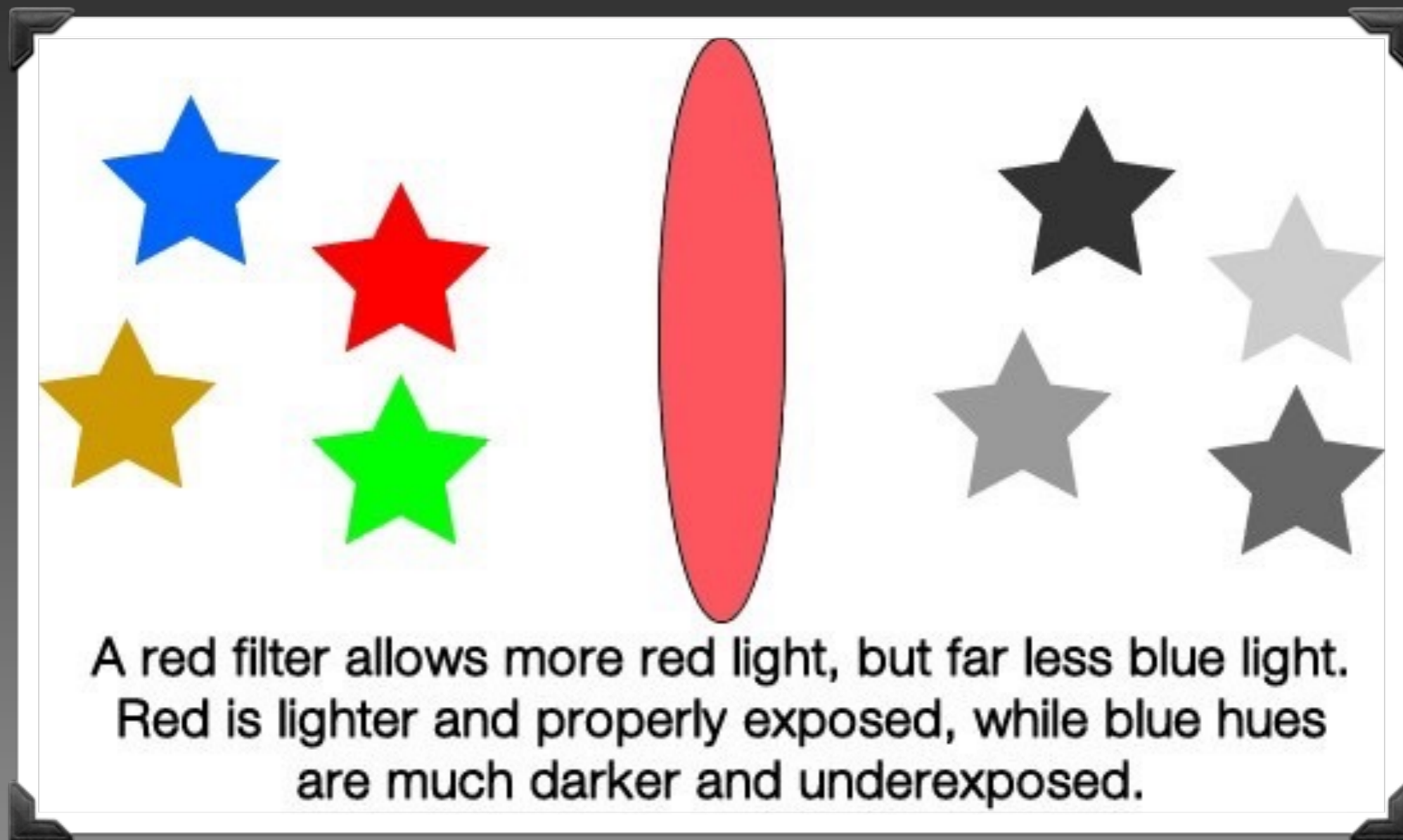


These filters operate by absorbing light on different parts of the spectrum while letting other colours pass through much more easily: green filters absorb more of most colours except green, blue blocks most colours except blue, and so on. This means that portions of the spectrum similar to the colour of the filter will be lighter since more of that colour of light makes it through the filter and essentially over-exposing those portions of the film.

Conversely, portions on the opposite side of the colour wheel from a given filter colour will be darker since less of that light is allowed to pass through. For example, this diagram illustrates the basic principle behind a red colour filter:



The fact that more red is allowed to enter through the camera lens means the camera's light meter would then adjust itself accordingly: you're essentially exposing for the reds, which means that a properly exposed black and white image with a red filter would have pleasing reds with very dark cyans, blues, and greens.



Modern Post Production Digital Colour Filters

By taking this basic idea and applying it to modern digital photography you can start to see how different black & white post-processing solutions work. In post production you can mimic the effects of a colour filter when converting an image to black and white. It's not quite the same as actually using a physical filter on your lens and shooting using black and white film, but it's a decent approximation that gets the job done for most circumstances. The trick is knowing which filter to use in a given situation.

So, let take three images
and take them through
this digital process.



- Photographic Credits:
- Page 3 - Ansel Adams
- All other images - James Mullen