

# WILL FILM DIE THIS YEAR?

John Henshall considers that the report of the death of film was not an exaggeration.

**T**his month marks the twelfth anniversary of *John Henshall's Chip Shop*, although my first article about photography without film, *Electronic Imaging Today*, appeared over eighteen years ago in the September 1986 issue.

It is at this time of year that I often pause to take stock of where photography has come from and where it is going.

It was my work in television – home cinema without film – which led me to believe that, one day, even still photography would also be filmless.

My RPS and BIPP Fellowships, in 1984, were both composed entirely of electronic images.

Twelve years ago the managing directors of some of the major photographic companies spoke on the British Photographic Association's council of the 'threat' of digital imaging. I suggested that a more positive approach to the digital future would be to make it an 'opportunity'.

Some of the major companies – such as Gretag, Ilford and Polaroid – have since ceased to exist in the form that we knew them. The oldest name in photography, Konica, merged with Minolta. Even Agfa has been hived off by its former owners, Bayer.

Ten years ago, these were among the companies from which photographers and laboratories made their major purchases.

Today companies such as Epson, Hewlett-Packard and Sony have become major players in the field of digital photography.

Camera manufacturers Canon and

Nikon have so far survived and flourished because photographers who have made major investments in their systems believe that they are more able to make a successful move from mechanical to digital. It's the lenses and accessories which make the system and, though Fuji and Kodak make DSLRs, these still rely on Canon- and Nikon-mount lenses.

Few companies the size of Kodak have managed to re-invent themselves and it remains to be seen whether Kodak can manage to do so.

Kodak is having a very tough time. Did you sense the note of desperation in its television advertising imploring us to make prints from our digital files? Kodak is clearly pinning its hopes on persuading consumers to make prints.

The trouble is, if the public do make more prints, these days there are many more ways to print them than using Kodak consumables.

In the days of film, paper prints were the only way to view images. Today there are many alternatives – computer screens, televisions and the displays of millions of cellphones. Consumers have changed and many of them don't even want prints at all.

Just watch today's young people, exchanging images between their phones by Bluetooth. On holiday we are more likely to send a picture of ourselves on a distant sunny beach back to the folk in the office from our cellphones. It's immediate – and a great way to make colleagues jealous.

No more getting the film developed and printed after returning to Blighty.

Why wait? The moment is now.

*Filmless by 2005?* was one of the

headlines for *Chip Shop* in the December 1996/January 1997 issue.

No, this prediction did not come from me. I have never been daft enough to put dates to major events. Things have a tendency to happen much sooner than we expect in this world of fast changing technology and predicting the demise of their familiar practices tends to upset people. Who would have predicted the incredible growth of the Internet, eMail and cellular phones even twelve years ago?

The *Filmless by 2005* prediction was the result of a two year study by Keith Norman of Jessops, who were already seeing their business contract.

"Young people ... want images on screen, they want them to work for them now, in colour," said Keith Norman, summing up his study which helped Jessops lead the High Street digital photography revolution.

In fact Keith Norman's vision probably saved Jessops from becoming "old-fashioned stores with shelves still filled with papers and chemicals, all covered in dust and cobwebs, while the computer store next door was selling all these computer peripherals like cameras, which we felt are our domain."

Today even the mighty Kodak – the most famous photographic brand in the world – is struggling to ensure that that does not happen to itself.

I bought a consumer photographic magazine just before last Christmas. Out from it dropped a Photo-Optix catalogue.

How many mentions of Kodak were there in that catalogue? Not one. That is bad news for what has long been the



**ABOVE:** This shot of a horse and rider was made using a 28–300mm zoom set at 300mm on the new Canon EOS-1Ds MkII DSLR camera. Exposure was 1/320 sec at f/6.3 at ISO400. The full image contains 4992 x 3328 uninterpolated pixels. Note the film-like tonality. **LEFT:** Big images are croppable. This is equivalent to a section from a 25 x 16.7 inches (63.4 x 42.3 cm) print.



**ABOVE:** The same shot acquired as a direct JPEG (top) and as a raw file (centre) processed in Adobe Photoshop CS. Exposure was 1/50 sec at f/5.6 using a 28–300mm zoom at 300mm handheld with image stabilisation. Lighting was domestic tungsten. The Canon EOS-1Ds MkII's ISO was set to the maximum of ISO3200. The camera has not managed to perform a neutral white balance in the very low colour temperature lighting (top) but manual processing (centre) produced quite acceptable results. The close-up of the eye (bottom) represents a section from a 33.3 x 22.2 inch (84.5 x 56.4 cm) print. Note the very low noise, even at ISO3200, of the 1Ds MkII.

**RIGHT:** What camera was this image captured on? How many megapixels? The shot was made in 1994 using a Kodak Professional DCS420 camera with a 1524 x 1012 pixel sensor – only 1.5 megapixels. The shot was 're-developed' in 1994 from the original raw file using the newest software. This shows that size – the number of pixels – is not as important as quality.





ABOVE: The Samsung D-500 cellphone (and hands-free loudspeaker) which has a built-in 1.3 megapixel (1524 x 1012 pixels) digital camera. The image of Grace Jones on the screen was uploaded to the phone from my picture library. The picture of the house (ABOVE RIGHT) was captured using this phone. Compare the 'quality' of this with the one in last month's issue using the Phase One P25. The picture of the guard on the preceding page was captured with a DCS420 with only a slightly higher number of pixels than the camera in this phone. BELOW: The forthcoming Kodak Easyshare-One with 3-inch screen features wireless connectivity using a special card. The camera was awarded CNET's 'Next Big Thing' and G4techTV's 'Best of CES' at the recent Consumer Electronics Show. Products such as this are what Kodak is pinning its hopes for the future on.



biggest name in photography.

A catalogue covering the whole gamut of photographic equipment and not one mention of Kodak. That would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. In fact it still is unthinkable.

Fortunately the big yellow giant has diversified and is big in graphics and health. It also owns a formidable intellectual property portfolio. The brand will not disappear.

Meanwhile, Kodak is making big cuts in its photographic business. Labs

and factories are being closed as the demand for silver halide products nose dives. Soon Kodak in the UK will be out of Hemel Hempstead, retreating to its original premises at Harrow where – in the Middlesex countryside – George Eastman wanted to set up his worldwide headquarters. There was plenty of water and pasture for the cows which would provide the gelatin.

Change is inevitable and, the way things are going, it is quite possible that there will be no Kodak corporate presence in the UK within a couple of years. It has happened elsewhere – Ireland now has just a distributor for Kodak products. The land at Harrow would make prime real estate – if there have not been any polluting leaks from its brightly coloured chemical drains.

Until 1999, Kodak was the only manufacturer of professional DSLRs. Housed in Canon and Nikon camera bodies, they were premium products. It had had the field to itself since introducing the DCS100 in 1991.

The DCS100 had a 1.3 megapixel CCD producing images with 1280 x 1024 pixels. It cost £15,000.

Fourteen years on, my cellphone incorporates a digital camera as a peripheral. It has a sensor which produces images with exactly the same number of pixels as the DCS100 – 1280 x 1024. The camera phone cost me nothing. It was a free upgrade.

Five years ago Nikon introduced its

own DSLR: the D1. It was priced at just over one third the price of a Kodak DCS620. The Nikon D1 was a DSLR which professional photographers could at last afford. Then Canon introduced their first DSLR, the D30, for under £2,000 including VAT.

Kodak had blown their chance to deliver large numbers of DSLRs at affordable prices.

As we begin 2005 I have a wealth of new DSLRs to get to know. The choice is huge, the quality staggering.

From Canon there's the brilliant EOS-20D at just over a grand and the superlative EOS-1Ds MkII for £6k.

From Nikon there's the inexpensive D70 and the imminent D2X.

From Fuji there's the magnificent S3 – a camera which proves that it's image quality, not pixel count, that really matters. Fuji's S1 and S2 have been my most significant DSLRs of the last four years. These are the cameras for which I abandoned film.

For me, film has already become just another historical photographic process. It got us where we are but its replacements now offer higher image quality more easily and at lower cost.

Ultimately it does not matter how we record our images. What matters is our creative vision and our use of light to express it. Sad as it may seem, it's time to celebrate the passing of a recording medium which has served us well.

**Film is dead. Long live photography!**