

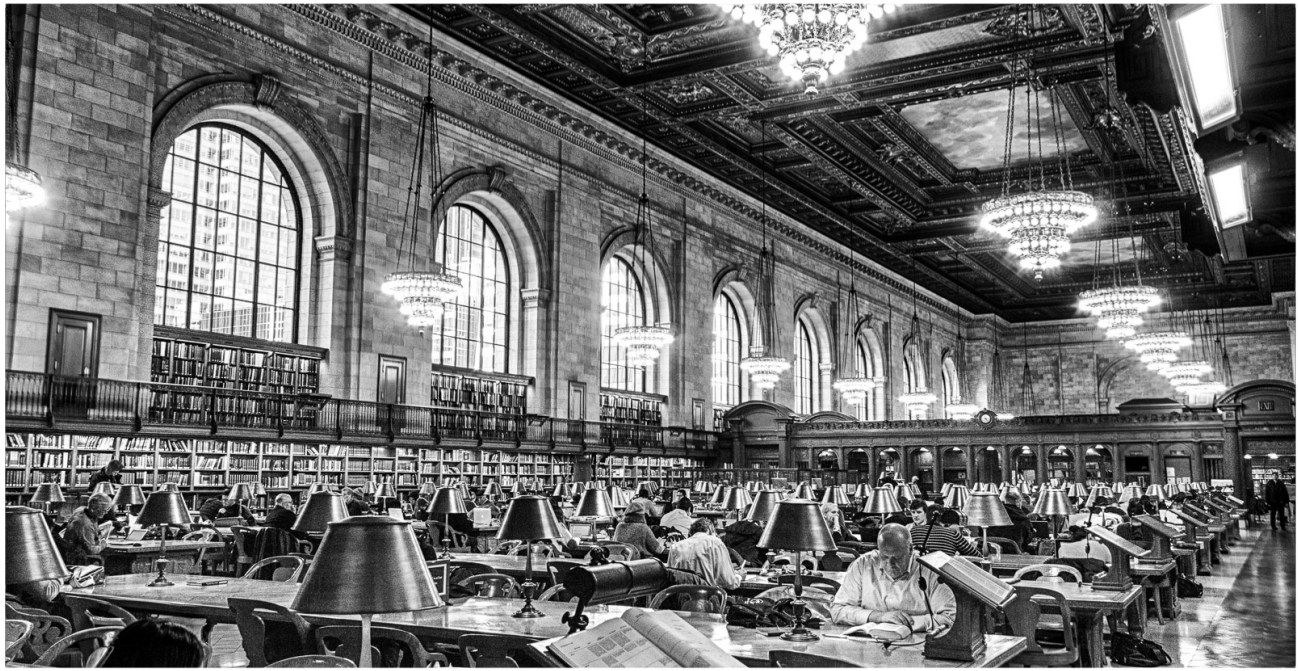


Shades of Grey

The Subtle Art of Monochrome Conversion

Presented By Jeff Hirsch At The Lake County Camera Club - September 3, 2015

What you see here tonight is just a small excerpt from a much more extensive and detailed day-long workshop I do several times a year.



Black & White Photography

The Rose Reading Room at the New York City Public Library

January 2013

Black and white photography will always hold a very special place in my my heart. It's what I grew up on, it's how I learned my way around a camera and a darkroom, and it is the foundation for all the photography I have gone on to do throughout my life.

Everything I have ever learned about photographic tone and contrast comes from my earliest shooting experiences and has stood me in good stead as I moved from black and white to color and more recently from analog to digital photography.

There's something so incredibly timeless, so essential, so zen about shooting black and white. Photography is reduced to it's purest elements of tone and contrast. And I find that incredibly appealing. Black and white photography has always been a part of my creative process and I suspect it will continue to be for years to come despite rapid changes of technology and technique.

Tonight, I'd like to share with you just a few of the many many methods available to us for making monochrome conversions. There are literally dozens of different ways to do this, so I will try to fit in as many as time allows.

Question Number One!

Why convert at all? Why not just shoot B&W?



This is often the first question I get asked whenever I talk about monochrome conversions.

“Why not just shoot the picture black and white in-camera to begin with?” (pause) You know, to be honest, I never really thought of that! Thank you and good night ladies and gentlemen, it’s been a lovely evening. No, I’m kidding of course.

The simple reason is that if you shoot in color and then convert to black and white during your post-processing, you have so much more information to work with and so much more flexibility in controlling the look of the final image.

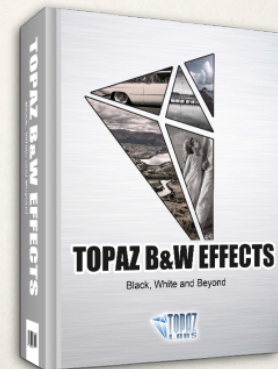
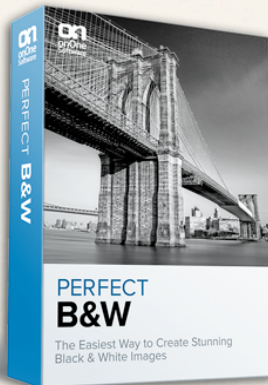
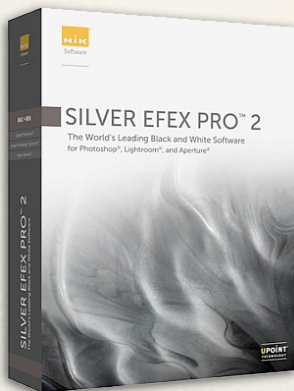
It may sound a little obvious, but it’s important to remember that in monochrome images, everything that was recorded as by your camera as a colored hue in the “real world” is going to be rendered as a particular tone or shade of grey in the final B&W image.

If you shoot black and white in-camera, all of the decisions about which colors will appear as which tones are already made for you and you can’t easily change them after the fact. You have limited options once you pull the trigger.

If you shoot color in camera, you are in complete control of how the various colors will be represented as greyscale tones in your finished image. A much greater variety of options available to the image maker.

And that’s the majority of what tonight’s techniques will deal with; a bunch of different ways to map or convert a range colors or hues into a range of monochrome tones or shades of grey.

Tools for Monochrome Conversions



Let's talk about the five commonly available tools for making beautiful black and white images.

If you own Photoshop (PS Elements) or Lightroom, you can make fantastic monochrome conversions without any add-on software or extra expense at all. Both programs have excellent features built right into them for making gorgeous black and white images. Photoshop alone has a fist-full of ways to make black and white photos.

If you get more serious about your conversions and wish to try some of the dedicated plug-in packages for making monochrome images, you might consider purchasing PS or LR plug-ins from any of the three leading vendors.

Nik Software (now owned by Google) offers Silver Efex Pro 2

OnOne offers Perfect B&W

and Topaz has their own B&W Effects

We will take a brief look at each of these third party plug-ins later in the presentation.

The good news is that your standard issue Photoshop, right out of the box, is host to any number of options for making great monochrome conversions, so we'll start there with a look at a few techniques.

Photoshop Conversion Methods

- * Desaturate color
- * Convert to Greyscale
- * Convert to Lab Color and extract L-channel
- * Extract Individual RGB Channel
- * Channel Blending
- * Image > Adjustments > Black and White



Lightroom Conversion Methods

- * Desaturate Color
- * Convert to B&W
- * Develop Presets
 - VSCO Film
 - X-Equals



PS & LR Plug-Ins



As I mentioned earlier, there are some third party monochrome conversion plugins available for Lightroom and Photoshop.

The programs from nik, OnOne, and Topaz are all laid out in a remarkably similar fashion. They look very much like each other and it's easy to confuse one for the other.

The left side of the screen is usually occupied with various presets, the center has the working area for the image, and the right side has all the various controls for adjusting the conversion parameters.

The conversion parameters usually include color filters or controls, brightness, contrast, detail, sharpness, levels, curves, and other tonal modifiers.

Each program also offers a variety of finishing touches that can be applied to your converted image. These include things like: Vignetting, colored toning, burned edges, various paper types, frames, grain, glow, and transparency options to blend with the original colored image

All three programs have some set or sub-set of those basic features and they are all pretty much laid out on the screen in the same way, so learning any one of them should give you a good idea of how they all work.

Each of the programs must solve the same problem of how to convert various hues into various shades or tones, and each of the programs has a slightly different way of doing it.

They each have their strengths and weaknesses, but I think I can rank them 1..2..3 in order based on my experience working with all of them over the last few years. This is just one person's opinion of course, your milage may vary.



Silver Efex Pro from Google/nik is pretty much the gold standard as far as dedicated monochrome conversion products goes. The nik software team has been developing this plug-in for a number of years now and it is very mature, robust, and full featured at this point. That is to say, it's stable, it gives consistent results, and it has lots of knobs for you to twiddle and tweak to your heart's content.

It also has nik's fabulous U-Point system for making selective localized adjustments using control points with a given radius. This tool alone makes the entire process much more playful allowing you to adjust smaller specific areas of your image without having to make a complex selection or mask.

Silver Efex has a histogram that can be used to light up each of the various tonal regions or "zones" in your monochrome image. You can then target those specific zones and make them brighter and darker, more or less contrasty.

The output from this plug-in is consistently high quality. I love the prints it produces on paper and on screen.



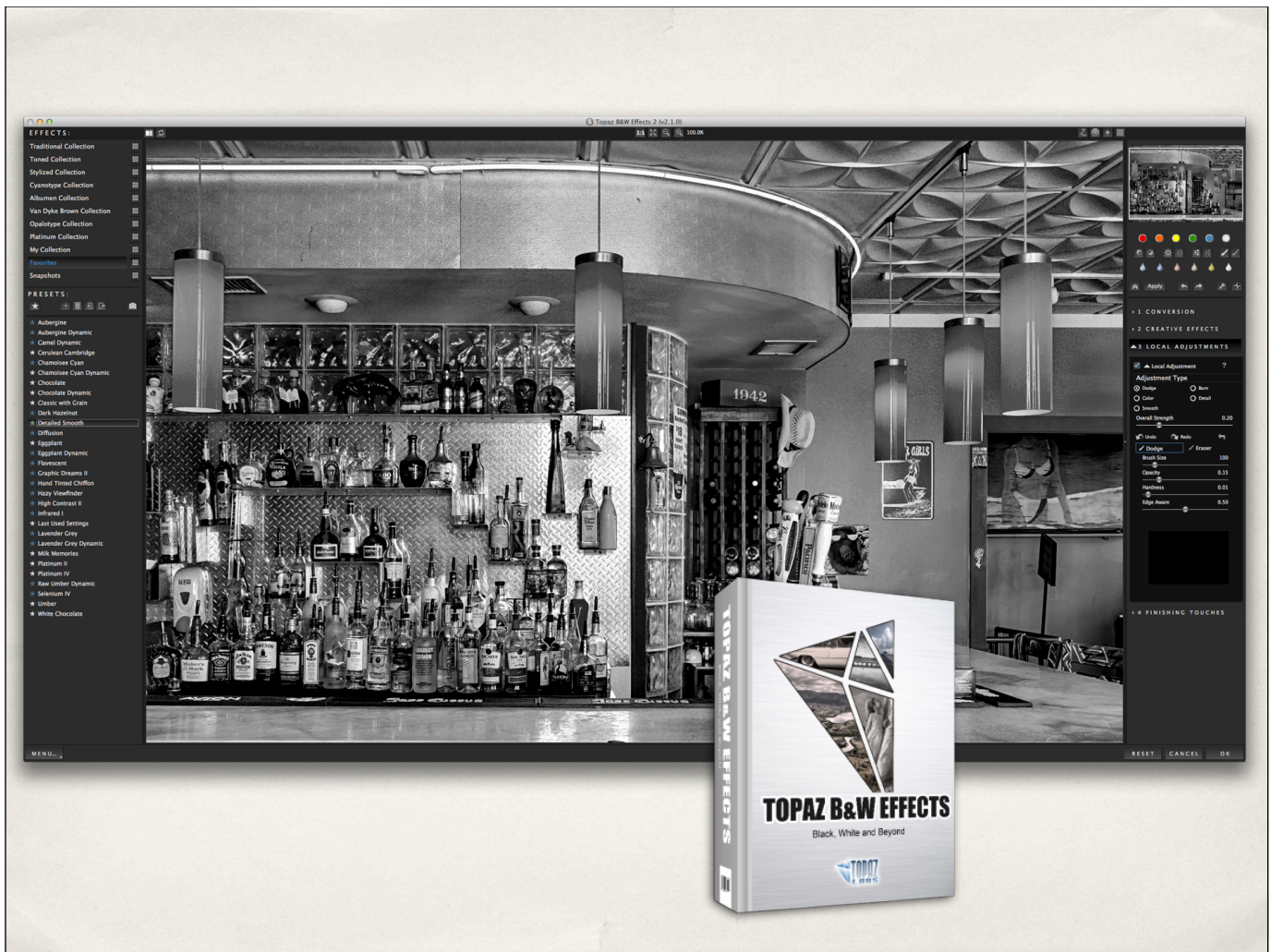
Coming in a fairly close second is Perfect B&W from OnOne Software. The program is sold as a stand-alone product or as part of their Perfect Suite package.

Although not quite as developed as Silver Efex, it has grown considerably from its earliest versions and is now a serious contender for the monochrome throne thanks in part to a huge selection of presets that are perfect for jump-starting your creative process.

The program also has a nice brush system for painting-in localized brightness, contrast, detail, etc. giving you an easy way to visually fine tune the conversion as it is happening.

I found the latest version to be easy to use and full of creative potential. I think it's a good complement to Silver Efex, quite honestly.

They mostly differ on how they handle localized adjustments and the variety of presets they offer.

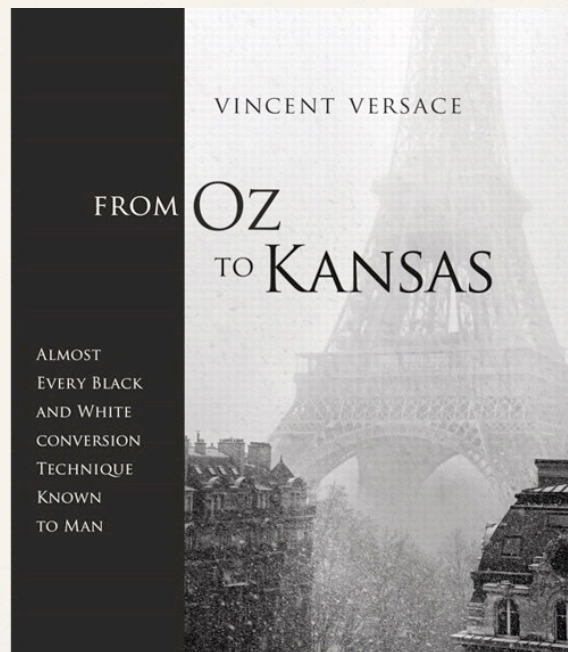


Rounding out the top three is Topaz B&W Effects which is similarly sold either as a stand-alone product or as part of the Topaz Photoshop Bundle.

This plug-in is perhaps the least mature of the bunch and has a slightly less polished interface than the others, but it can do a serviceable monochrome conversion in a pinch. The basic controls are all there, but it's not too fancy and the presets aren't quite as useful as the other two packages.

I also found this plugin to be the least responsive and longest to re-compile a new preview when I made a change. Switching from one folder of presets to another means you have to wait for the plug in to render a preview for each of the presets in that folder. This tends to slow down the creative process a bit and I get tired of waiting for it to catch up with me. The other two programs do not suffer from these kinds of slowdowns and are quite a bit more responsive. That has been my experience with the Topaz plugs in general. They produce great looking output, but they are much slower and a bit less graceful to use than their counterparts.

For Further Reading...



http://kelbyone.com/course/vversace_oz_2_kansas/
<http://www.lifeafterphotoshop.com/apply-zone-system-silver-efex-pro/>

Those are just a few of the various methods that are available to us as image makers. There is a tremendous amount of room for experimentation and creative play and I hope to see many more monochrome images in future competitions.

Unfortunately, due to our time constraints tonight, we can only scratch the surface of a very deep and rich subject. There are so many different techniques and tools still left to discover and discuss but that will have to wait for another day! But I want to leave you with a few resources you can use to explore the subject further on your own.

There are three weblinks at the bottom of the screen and they will all be included with the notes from tonight when they get posted on the Camera Club website.

First of all, I highly recommend Vincent Versace's book and video "From Oz to Kansas" which discusses "Almost every black and white conversion technique known to man."

He has also released an updated training video through Scott Kelby called "Oz to Kansas 2.0" that deals with recent developments in the field of monochrome conversions.

For those of you who are interested in using Silver Efex to employ Ansel Adams Zone System in your B&W processing, check out the second link for more details on how to do that. It's very cool if you understand Adams method for breaking down tonal values in an image.



That's all Folks!