Melbourne photographer Jane Brown's *The Eternal Eye*

Paint it black

Simon Caterson extols the virtues of monochrome in a colour-saturated world

DO you dream in colour? If you are under 55, then it is quite likely you do, though the colours in your dreams may not be as vivid as those experienced in the waking world. If, however, you belong to an older generation brought up on black-and-white films and television, you are likelier to dream in monochrome.

According to research carried out by a psychology student at Scotland's University of Dundee in 2008, dreaming in black and white is a lingering effect in visual culture of the great era of monochrome that spanned the invention of photography in the 19th century through to the development of cinema and early television in the 20th. Up until the 1970s, black and white was largely preferred in photojournalism, as exemplified by *Life* magazine, despite the increasingly widespread and inexpensive alternative offered by colour film.

Even though the Technicolor process was introduced into films in the 1930s, important feature films continued to be shot in black and white well into the 60s and its use was considered by many to allow greater social realism than colour. There was an Oscar specifically awarded for black-and-white cinematography until as late as 1967.

In the 20s, French writer Colette championed what she called the "deep domain" of black and white. "Black, white, their combinations, their infinite contrasts," she wrote, "demonstrate to us every day that they adapt very well to the arbitrary, that is, the intervention of human art." If colour were to take over completely, Colette asks, "What will happen to the gripping contrast of shadow and light, psychological commentaries of incomparable eloquence?"

With the immense variety and saturation of colour everywhere in contemporary life thanks to digital imaging, it is perhaps no wonder monochrome is increasingly beguiling. (This does not always mean the use of black and white: from the earliest times photographers and filmmakers have used different colours as tints and employed monochromatic effects such as sepia.)

Partly the allure is one of retro glamour, the fascinating strangeness of the recent past. One of the more noteworthy films premiered at this year's Cannes film festival demonstrated that black-and-white cinema still has the power to impress and seduce. *The Artist*, a French film that tells the story of a fading Hollywood matinee idol in the 20s, is a throwback not only to monochrome cinema but also to the era of silent film.

The Artist is remarkable for its embrace of the cinematic as well as historical past but is not unique. South Australian-based director Rolf de Heer's 2007 silent film *Dr Plonk* was not only shot in monochrome but the filming was done using a camera adapted so it could be hand-cranked. The action was set in 1907 and the technology used to evoke that era was chosen accordingly.

De Heer's previous feature film, *Ten Canoes*, also drew inspiration from a monochrome source. A documentary photograph of 10 canoes being poled across the Arafura Swamp taken in the 30s by anthropologist Donald Thomson was suggested by actor David Gulpilil as the point of departure for the film.

Although most of the action of *Ten Canoes* was shot in colour, the swamp scenes derived from the original photograph were filmed in black and white.

Contemporary feature films such as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (which won the Oscar for best cinematography in 1993 as well as being named best film), Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Man Who wasn't There* and George Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* demonstrate Hollywood's recent embrace of black and white, although John Boorman had to overcome studio resistance to release in black and white his Irish gangster biopic *The General*, a film set in 1980s Dublin.

Audiences clearly weren't resistant to lack of colour: in the 80s media mogul Ted Turner commissioned colourised versions of classics such as *Casablanca* and films by Frank Capra that were mostly rejected by viewers, and director Gus Van Sant's 1998 frame-by-frame reshoot of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* in colour failed to cast a shadow on the monochrome original.

According to Roger Deakins, the cinematographer who shot *The Man Who wasn't There* — the Coens' homage to film noir — black and white has unique aesthetic properties. In a 2001 interview for *American Cinematographer*, Deakins explained that "the sheer beauty of a well-composed and well-lit black-and-white frame is hard to beat because it's difficult to produce that type of focus and simplicity when you're shooting in colour. It's vitally important to be able to separate shapes and surfaces through the use of light and shade, and to focus the audience's attention on what you want them to see. Colour 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."

Film historian Brian McFarlane, whose most recent book is *Real and Reel: The Education of an Obsessive Film Critic*, doesn't remember his dreams, much less whether they are in colour, but he does recall in the late 40s and 50s growing up, as he puts it, "in black and white".

"When I was a child, people used to say that films were so much more realistic in black and white and I remember thinking, 'What are they talking about? What kind of view of the world do they have?' " he says.

"But paradoxically you can also see what they mean: things are not being glamorised, there is a sense of felt life, in Henry James's phrase. It is there is in a film like *It Always Rains on Sunday* that depends absolutely on the black and white. At the same time, of course, there is glamour in film noir classics such as *Out of the Past*."

McFarlane suggests the easiest way to appreciate the power of great black and white films is to take the *Psycho* test and compare monochrome classics with remakes shot in colour. A prime example, he says, is David Lean's *Brief Encounter*, a much admired drama from the 40s with Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson about two strangers who meet at a railway cafe and are brought to the brink of adultery. The film was remade in the 70s with Sophia Loren and Richard Burton.

"It simply didn't work in colour," McFarlane says. "Those wonderful black-and-white images of the train station, for instance, couldn't be matched. Black and white caught the ordinariness of the world, which might sound like an odd thing to say."

Seeing things in both monochrome and colour has offered dramatic possibilities to some filmmakers. Famously, the scenes in *The Wizard of Oz* of Dorothy's humdrum life in Kansas are sepia, while her journey through Oz has a stained-glass Technicolor glow. Similarly, the more recent Hollywood feature *Pleasantville* contrasts the colourful and exciting present with drab 50s American suburbia, in which the characters are trapped in a kind of black-and-white domestic torpor. An interesting kind of reversal takes place in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire*, in which heaven is depicted in black and white while the mortal world is visited by the angels is in colour.

For some people, living in black-and-white spaces is heaven on earth; monochrome is a key movement in interior design, especially minimalism. In her recent book *Design in Black and White*, Janelle McCulloch writes that black and white is being rediscovered. "Now, after a few years of being overshadowed by beiges, grays and a vast palette of dizzingly chic colours, black and white are being revived again as increasing numbers of aesthetes realise just how eye-catching these impeccable tones can be."

According to McCulloch, one of the reasons for this revival is the realisation that black and white is impervious to fashion: "In designing collections in monochrome tones, designers are ensuring that they will still be fashionable in one, two or even 10 years' time. The furniture styles may be ultra-modern, but the monochrome finishes make them instant classics."

McCulloch notes that in the historic Old Town part of Key West in Florida, most of the period homes are painted in black and white.

Though photojournalism — along with architectural and documentary photography in general — has switched decisively to colour, art photography retains a strong commitment to black and white. Just as many audiophiles continue to treasure their vinyl, there is a substantial "analog" movement in contemporary photography that

adheres to old-fashioned development techniques and the concept of the darkroom as a den of aesthetic alchemy.

One Australian art photographer who couldn't imagine shooting in anything other than black and white is Melbourne-based Jane Brown, although she says most of her fellow photography students at art school rejected monochrome in favour of colour.

"I have always enjoyed it when people look at my work to be surprised that it was photographed recently," she says. "I enjoy that ambiguity." Brown says people who look at black-and-white photographs often assume they must be old even when the subject cannot be other than contemporary. "I have been described as having a Victorian eye, which I am not sure is strictly true; nonetheless, it was a time that saw the birth of photography, so I take it as a compliment.

"I suppose I would describe black and white, or monochrome, photography as a filter. It filters out the colour so you become aware of the light, the shadows, the composition and not the colour."

One of Brown's most striking photographs is an image of a peacock, a picture she took on the spur of the moment from a museum balcony at Churchill Island on Victoria's southeast coast. "What is unexpected about this image is that it is an icon of colour, but rendered in black and white. The peacock also references immortality — it has been used as a symbol of Juno and of Christ — and of course conjures the eye of the photographer, the camera and the viewer."

Jean Dujardin and Berenice Bejo in French film *The Artist*

Brown aims in her work to capture a feeling that may be described as monochrome mournfulness. "I find it interesting how monochrome is used to differentiate the living and the dead, the past and the present. It has an ability to transcend the constraints of time, memory and death. I examine this a lot in my work — landscapes seem to have vestiges or traces of past life and memorials become otherworldly."

Pablo Picasso was influenced by black-and-white photojournalism and news footage in his re-creation of the bombing of a Spanish town by German warplanes during the Spanish Civil War. His 1937 painting *Guernica* is a giant black, white and grey mural depicting the suffering of people and animals under bombardment. Though the figures are abstracted and allegorical rather than strictly realistic, Picasso apparently was influenced by seeing newsreels of the fighting as he was making the painting.

Among Australian artists, Brett Whiteley stands out not just for his many drawings in black ink, but also for the fact he apparently preferred to wear black-and-white clothes.

Monochrome has indeed had an immense and enduring impact on fashion. The two enduring modern monochrome staples of women's and men's fashion — the little black dress and the tuxedo — became established in the 20s and 30s just as photography and cinema had consolidated their dominance over popular visual culture. Black and white had never featured in popular fashion on such a scale and the little black dress and the tux remain essential items of formal apparel.

Perhaps the most famous little black dress was the Givenchy worn by Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Though the film was shot in colour, Hepburn's signature image in the film is indelibly monochrome. Another famous little black dress, this one detailed with white, was worn by Catherine Deneuve playing a prostitute in *Belle de Jour*, the colour combination "creating an image", as the *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion* notes, "that was at once pure and corrupt".

The wedding gown worn by Hepburn in *Sabrina*, a white dress with details in black, provides an interesting reversal of that idea.

Variations on the little black dress continue to form part of new collections by important designers. In *The Little Black Dress*, an exhaustive history of the garment, Amy Holman Edelman writes that the dress is "emblematic of a woman's freedom of choice, her equal participating in the world and her declaration that, this time, she is dressing for herself". Since black absorbs light, the little black dress is also flattering to the figure, as indeed is a tuxedo.

For her part, Brown says she typically wears clothes in lots of colours, though she does have a black-and-white cat called Ilford, named after a famous brand of monochrome photographic paper. And she says monochrome is not dreaming but the essence of the waking world; a consciously defined aesthetic sensibility. "I have fantasised about having monochrome eyesight," Brown says with a laugh, "but I'm pretty sure I dream in colour."

***Jane Brown**'s exhibition Afterlife can be seen at Ballarat International Foto Biennale, which runs August 20-September 18.*

***The Artist** will be in limited release from January 19 next year.*

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What the critics are saying
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