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In Conversation with Writer, Journalist, Academic - and Leica enthusiast - John Naughton

by Philip Gray

John Naughton is a regular Guardian columnist, Professor of Public Understanding of Technology at the Open University, Vice President of Wolfson College Cambridge and author of *From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg: What you really need to know about the Internet* - and also an enthusiastic Leica user for many years.

● **In your recent Guardian article, *Why I Love my Leica* you described yourself as one of the photographers who suffer from an obsessive quest for just the one truly memorable picture. Plenty of our readers will recognise those symptoms but when did you catch that illness?**

It was so long ago that I can't remember, and I have yet to achieve that memorable picture.

● **I believe you had an unusual introduction to Leica cameras by nearly dropping one. What happened?**

I grew up in one of the most beautiful parts of Ireland; Killarney, County Kerry. I was in a park with my parents one day when they started chatting to a young woman who was visiting the area. As a young teenager I wasn't paying much attention until she started to explain that she was a photographer, and that she was fascinated by the cloudscapes and unusual lighting in this part of Ireland - and that's when I started to listen. By the time she started to explain about light, and using yellow filters to deepen the blue skies, I was becoming very interested. The only cameras I knew

about were simple and made of plastic so it was a shock when she handed me one of her Leicas to look at: it was so heavy that I almost dropped it.

● **How long was it before you managed to buy your first Leica and what did that camera teach you about photography?**

That was when I was a student in Cambridge and it was an M2. It came with a 50mm Elmar and later I bought a 50mm Summilux. I went on to buy more Leica kit, including a Leicaflex, and gradually managed to buy better lenses. An M4-P became my favourite film camera for a long time - and I still have it today.

● **You now use an M9 - a modern digital camera but with a very similar design to your first Leica from years ago. What do you most enjoy about that camera?**

Leica has always produced outstanding lenses, but I think they 'fumbled' a little in the early days of digital cameras: I thought their early ventures in the field were disappointing. I bought an M8, which may have the continuity of M series design but the sensor was certainly not outstanding. I think Leica finally got it right with the M9. I have had one for eight years and enjoy using it very much. Working with it feels much like handling one of my earlier film M cameras, but it just happens to be digital. I also have a Q which I think is the best camera Leica has ever made. I have begun to use it more than the M.

● **You have written about technological developments following an S-curve of rapid development followed by a slowing pace of improvement. How does the development of digital Leicas fit this curve while they are retaining historical design principles and reducing technological complexities to introduce even simpler digital M cameras?**

That is a very perceptive observation. Clearly they are following the S-curve in their lens design. The latest f0.95 Noctilux-M ASPH, with tangible but relatively small improvements over previous versions, is right at the top end of the curve. The digital M series cameras are on a different S-curve, while the Q, combining superb build quality with an outstanding lens, is on yet another S-curve because of innovative features such as in-camera cropping. Combined with the excellent sensor this effectively gives you three lenses. In my opinion they have hit the jackpot with the Q.

There is one digital Leica that I have never tried, but does intrigue me, and that is the Monochrom. I have seen some wonderful work produced with them. We visit Provence each summer and always stop in Arles on the way. The city is home to an annual

two-month International Photography Festival: Les Rencontres d'Arles. When you walk around in the evening at festival time you see two kinds of people; there are those on the Van Gogh trail and there are serious photographers - a surprising number with Monochroms.

● **How would you describe your own style of photography - favourite subjects? Online or prints?**

I am someone who enjoys taking pictures: I wouldn't say my photography is important enough to have its own style. One thing I do like to see is sharpness in a photograph. Henri Cartier-Bresson is one of my photographic heroes. I think he was a superb photographer and I have collected several of his books, but I can struggle with the lack of sharpness in some of his pictures: perhaps it's just because I am an engineer. And there is one type of photography I don't admire - the current trend of 'street photographers' who snatch close-up photographs of people, often using a flashgun. I think this is almost a form of assault.

● **How do you explain the growing enthusiasm for film photography again, particularly among younger people who have only known digital cameras?**

This may be just analogue nostalgia, although there are some good arguments for film photography in terms of the qualities of different film stock giving more 'feeling' than the more precise digital images. There is a parallel with the current enthusiasm for listening to music on vinyl which is a different experience to listening to the more usual mp3 recordings.

Another reason for a film-based photography enthusiasm is the development of 'Lomography', celebrating the distortions produced by certain lowcost lenses. There are also people who use software to deliberately degrade high quality images taken with their smartphones just for the effect. Is it perhaps just a flight from digital perfection?

● **Are you still striving for that one memorable picture?**

Of course. Isn't every photographer? The great philosopher Derek Parfit, who died last year, was an obsessively keen photographer. He used to go to Venice for two weeks every year with the aim of producing just one good picture of a particular building. The chosen picture would be heavily manipulated during the processing stage and all the other photographs destroyed. I don't know anyone who has seen any of his finished photographs but I do know other photographers who would never consider showing their work to anyone else.

