Plustek OpticFilm 120 rollfilm scanner

A long time ago, in an unfashionable arm of a spiral galaxy... images were captured using this novel mixture of chemicals layered onto some sort of base material. Most commonly in the latter years of the 20th century, that base was flexible celluloid and the chemicals were branded by Fujifilm, and had this habit of capturing really lovely colours and highlights, at the expense of rather dense shadows.

Now, in an era of thoroughly straightforward light-sensing electronics, this quaint practice of exposing complex mixtures of chemistry seems thoroughly troublesome. And yet, a wealth of material has been produced that remains on film and good, solid technology for getting it into the computer is increasingly hard to find. In fact, in the space of a decade the market for medium format capable scanners all but disappeared, the **Hasselblad Flextight** being a stunning, but expensive legacy device thankfully kept in production. Where once the merits of Sprintscans, Coolscans, Dimage Scans, Microtek and others would be hotly debated, until a couple of years ago the discussions mostly centred around how to keep an ancient, noisy beast of a computer running with obsolete software and where to get new lamps.

With the appearance of the **OpticFilm 120** from Plustek, there is now a choice. Reflecta's MF5000 scanner did not capture the essence of those last desktop systems, falling short on build, carrier and image quality, though the specifications were quite up front about the 3.6 Dynamic range and consumer-lead design. The price in the UK, at £2,250 (now £1,750) no doubt helped keep it off the radar of all but the most determined film photographers. Plustek's design is not only a resurrection of the classic wide-carrier rectangular box with motorised feed, it's an improvement over many of the last generation offerings, with clever adjustable frame guides and LED illumination which does away with the warm up and stabilisation times CCFL based units endured.

At £1,999, it's expensive for a brand which has spent the past few years producing worthy, but relatively low quality, 35mm manual-feed boxes. The OpticFilm 7000 and 8000 series offer more convenience than a transparency lid and flatbed, but as representatives of the best affordable scanning solution, they fall short of the standards which existed when the market was well supplied and competitive. It is unwise to doubt the knowledge and expertise Plustek have, working with Lasersoft who offered *SilverFast* as a powerful, calibrated and HDR capable alternative to manufacturer software and still market it as a solution competing with the popular *Vuescan* package that many operators rely on to keep older scanners working.

Unlike previous scanners in this class, the OpticFilm 120 has multiple frame rollfilm holders in 6 x 4.5, 6 x 6, 6 x 7 and 6 x 9 sizes as well as 35mm slide and double filmstrip, and 120 adjustable.

Power without glory

Addressing *SilverFast* first, it's a mixed blessing. We've moved on from the days of TWAIN drivers and similar nightmares, and *SilverFast*'s workflow is very much about getting images on to disc, not directly into the editor. It is, without a doubt, a very powerful package. Yet it falls down in two or three key areas.

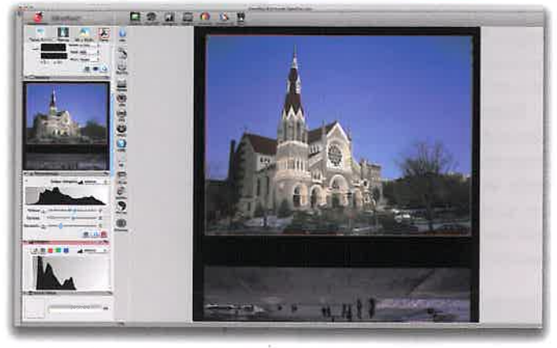
First, and most frustrating, is the almost painfully dated appearance. This software was updated to Version 8, a much promoted revision to bring it bang up to date (for comparison, *SilverFast 6* which shipped with the Epson A3 scanner we use was little changed from the days of Mac OS 8) and yet it eschews standard user interface guidelines and appearance, for little benefit. Even the pointer changes to a childish looking blue-glow slightly heavier one. There's little advantage to this – the crosshairs do not stand out more – it is as if the software were developed without a solid, established and well documented environment.

Second, it can be decidedly unintuitive. Getting used to *SilverFast* has always been a labour of love to get a specific result; something which users were used to in 1993 or even 2003, but jars when the speed of digital file acquisition and presentation in *Adobe Bridge* or *Lightroom* is so impressive. The scanner's claimed D-max of 4.2 and specified dynamic range should allow a raw format capture that could then be processed in one of these applications without having to break workflow.

Finally, and this is in part a pet peeve, the licensing structure of *SilverFast* borders on oppressive. It's an optional, third party package for many users – but with a scanner at this price, it's infuriating that it does not upgrade *past* licences, or work with scanners other than the 120.

LaserSoft charge moderately high figures for generic *SilverFast* or upgrades and the mechanism by which they protect it can be quite obtrusive, not showing installed scanners, requiring log-ins into the website to get updates and so forth. If this were a cut-down, bargain basement package with a similarly cheap and cheerful scanner, it would be understandable. At this price level, it would seem reasonable to get a software package that at least acknowledges you're probably serious about scanning and may own previous versions and supported scanners.

By "moderately high figures", you can look to *SilverFast Ai Studio*, which costs €650, or the upgrade to the *Archive Suite* (presumably still only supporting the one scanner) for €169 (reduced from €244). These packages do upgrade to the option of storing 16 bits per channel including the IR dust removal scan for a 64-bit raw file.



The SilverFast program offers comprehensive control, but installing this latest version will not update any earlier SilverFast licences used with other scanners you may own.

SilverFast's strengths are in processing dense and contrasty slides. It offers in previous versions "HDR", and now "Multi Exposure", to cope with the dark shadows and detailed highlights materials like Velvia could deliver. Film profiles are included to allow compensation for standard colour casts, and the historic IT8 calibration for Kodachrome remains, along with IT8 targets for other media. A 35mm Kodachrome target, of which few remain available, will cost €199-299...

Scans take up to 3 minutes, with many variables – one of the limiting factors for the scanner is the use of USB 2.0, which seems somewhat low-end when Firewire was once commonplace and USB 3 has been available for a couple of years. It's not just a matter of bandwidth; sustained USB transfers can place a significant load on the host computer, which for a workflow reliant on multitasking can be frustrating.

A claimed dynamic range of 4.8 seems to have little bearing on the real-world results; this is no more or less than the theoretical maximum a 16-bit per channel file can present. The D-Max of 4.2 is impressive, allowing better shadow recovery from transparencies, but real world results do reveal noise. With the benefit of hindsight, this is still an improvement over the scanners of old yet expectations of image quality are much higher now.

Where we do see advantages are in the computers and displays we work with. It's clear that *SilverFast* does a very good job of dust and scratch removal for a simple, automatic IR pass and process – more than sufficient for most reproduction purposes – and colour balance and exposure is very controllable.

The cleverly designed holders and transport allow scanning of 6 x 12 media, and the 35mm carriers speed up batch processing by supporting two strips side by side. Carrier design has been a make or break aspect of film scanners since the technology was first created, and they range from sublime – the heavy, precision engineered paddle-like Beseler enlarger based technology of the old Leaf/Linotype 45 used for 5 x 4 media, which gripped and tensioned the transparencies for precise scanning and easy cleaning – to the ridiculous flimsy thin plastic carriers many flatbed and transparency combinations require.

Plustek have devised sturdy plastic carriers with metal supports for hinged and adjustable frame guides. Whilst not tensioning the film as accurately as some high-end options, the magnetic clamping works well and most media will be held flat enough for a scanner which appears not to offer any focus control. The source scan resolution of 5,300dpi bears this out, as it remains unchanged for 35mm or medium format sources it would seem the scanner is merely sampling the full width of the carriage and cropping to suit, rather than changing reproduction ratio.

In fact, in terms of the overall package and pricing there seems to be an element of "good enough", rather than "excelling", and I'd particularly like to see a choice of USB 2 and Firewire, if not USB 3 simply to avoid having yet another USB device, probably existing on a shared bus.

The carriers feel like they would stand up to serious bureau use, and this bodes well for anyone looking to put their *Photoshop* and printing skills to good use rescuing and restoring family clients' old slides and negatives. Whilst it is difficult to suggest that this is an ideal product to justify that business case alone – something more automated like the Flextight would be a better option – if you have material of value to stock libraries or even your own personal archive, the additional service you could offer may make investing in the OpticFilm 120 worthwhile. One oddity of the software is that although the scanner detects the presence of a carrier, and there's a large white square which looks ideally suited for some sort of optical coding, it does not recognise which carrier is in use.

Right now, with prices of the last Coolscan medium-format models well into four figures and those scanners suffering failed lamps, unsupported software and simply not being something that can be relied upon for any volume of work, Plustek's intelligent approach to the mechanical engineering of the OpticFilm 120 puts it in pole position in a race of two. It holds a significant lead, and it's unlikely that competition will appear; it's even less likely that any firms will beat the OpticFilm 120's image quality without a significantly higher price.

– Richard Kilpatrick

Plustek is imported by Intro2020 Ltd – see: www.intro2020.co.uk