

Data Publics

Public Plurality in an Era of Data Determinacy

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The aesthetic society: or how I edit my Instagram¹

Lev Manovich



Figure 9.1 Author's Instagram homepage, 17 December 2019

I caught the tail end of punk, when the Pistols were already disbanded, and less revolutionary but still decent bands like the Stranglers, the Fall and Pete Shelley's Buzzcocks were spitting and being spat on, and shouting out against boredom and bad pop music.

When I walk through that village now, or the town where I live – Totnes – or, indeed, London or Manchester, I don't really see any tribes, except perhaps for raven-haired emos and leather

jacketed rockists. What I do see is a single look. It goes by various names, but hipster is the most common. Its dress code is “funny” or “unique” T-shirts, trousers with tight calves, perhaps an ironic tweed jacket, perhaps branded archless pumps and perhaps a WG Grace/Taliban beard.

Chris Moss, “Why don’t young people want to be part of a tribe anymore?” (2015)

The dizzying growth of metropolises (megalopolises, rather) as demographers inform us, can only foster the development of “villages within the city”. We are, and it is characteristic of the contemporary cities, in the presence of a mass-tribe dialectic; the mass being the all-encompassing pole, the tribe being the pole representing a particular crystallization.

Without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, it [“urban tribe”] refers to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and it is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that appear and form.

Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes – The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (1996)

From airport terminals decorated like Starbucks to the popularity of hair dye among teenage boys, one thing is clear: we have entered the Age of Aesthetics. Sensory appeals are everywhere, and they are intensifying, radically changing how Americans live and work... Every startup, product, or public space calls for an aesthetic touch, which gives us more choices, and more responsibility. By now, we all rely on style to express identity. And aesthetics has become too important to be left to the aesthetes.

Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style* (2004)

The Rise of Aesthetic Society

We live in aesthetic society where the production of beautiful images, interfaces, objects and experiences are central to its economic and social functioning, as well as the identities of hundreds of millions of people. While aesthetic refinement has been central to all human cultures for thousands of years, the rise of mass production of all consumer goods in the 19th century led to the highest levels of such refinement to only be available to the rich and upper middle class. But after 1990, the growth of global middle class, the emergence of experience economy, the commercialization of “cool,” “hip,” “avant-garde,” and “experimental”, new manufacturing methods and new materials, and the adoption of digital technologies, changed this situation. Together, these forces lead to the development of what I call “aesthetic society.”

The first author to note was probably Los Angeles cultural critic Virginia Postrel in her 2004 book *The Substance of Style* (2004). In the following fifteen years, the mass aestheticization of society advanced significantly, affecting many other types of products, spaces, messages, and so on. The sophistication of aesthetics also advanced: today many cutting-edge examples from 2004 appear naïve and simplistic.

For example, consider the design of contemporary mobile phones. As objects, they carry precision, nuances and aesthetic richness that before was only possible in very expensive objects such as haute couture, where each item is created by hand from start to finish with extreme attention to detail. But in contrast to haute couture, the same phone models are owned by members of the global middle class, as well as by the rich.

The same democratization of sophisticated, refined aesthetic took place in a number of

other areas such as hotel design, car design, and presentation of food in restaurants. The interior of many economy cars in 2020 looks more sophisticated than the interior of luxury cars ten years earlier. Similarly, today, endless inexpensive restaurants feature food presentation that ten years ago would only be available in selected expensive restaurants. Twenty years earlier, such aestheticized presentation was even more rare, only found in nouvelle cuisine and “molecular gastronomy” restaurants.

The democratization of sophisticated aesthetic began in the 1990s, though a few “design hotels” were already created earlier: Blakes in London (1978), Morgans (1984), Royalton (1987) and Paramount (1989) in New York City. But the movement really began to take off in 1993 when Claus Sendlinger founded Design Hotels group in 1993. It began with a list of 10 hotels, today in 2020, the majority of new hotels which are being built would be called “design hotels” ten years ago. However, this does not mean that the rise of aesthetic society has reached its limits. I believe that this process may continue for many decades. It is always possible to use and mix new materials and offer aesthetic effects that were not possible before. It is also possible to offer more individualized or unique products and experiences in many lifestyle areas.

Look around you. While products, spaces, visual media, and experiences such as eating out have more interesting and refined aesthetics, they are still not individualized. Today examples of mass individualization are still rare, and are also quite limited. Drogerie Market drugstores in Germany allow customers to customize their own personal care products – for example, selecting an existing shower gel and then choosing from a number of fragrance choices, and also creating their own label (Sibol, 2014). NIKE BY YOU (previously called NIKEiD) and miadidas make possible for customers to customize their sport shoes. (Adidas started to customize shoes already in early 1990s but only for selected successful athletes (Baena and Winkelhues, 2016).)

While mass individualization, where each customer can customize a product, is in many ways still mostly a promise today, a different individualization process that started in the 1990s has been fully developed. Before the 1990s, many types of what we today would call lifestyle products and experiences were designed by selecting an established style or template. Most chefs did not try to create dishes that would be unique in taste or presentation – instead they followed the conventions. Hotels were designed according to an existing style and did not stand out by uniqueness of design.

Between 1870 and 1980, experimentation, explicit departure from traditions and rules, and the pursuit of unique style by each creator, mostly happened in the art fields and not in mass culture. But after 1980, mass culture slowly starts to adopt these ideas. The design of storefronts absorbs installation art, music videos absorb experimental film, and fashion enters its “modernist” experimental phase. This adoption of modernism in mass culture puts focus on creating unique aesthetic experiences. Thus, the key idea behind “design hotels” is that each offers an individual design that you will not find anywhere else.

As design society becomes more mature, the value of aesthetic changes. Paradoxically, in this society, aesthetic is both more and less important than in the mass consumer society of the 20th century. It is more important because it matters to more people. For example, as described in Pierre Bourdieu’s book *Photography: A Middle Brow Art* (1965) for most people involved in popular photography, aesthetics was seen as something foreign – reserved for professionals and upper classes. Comparing this to photography on Instagram in the second part of 2010s, we see a big difference. In my Cultural Analytics Lab, we used

computational tools to analyze 17 million Instagram photos shared between 2012 and 2016 in 16 world cities. We found that at least in big cities, a significant proportion of users are quite aware about the aesthetic possibilities of the medium, as opposed to only automatically following photo conventions that dictate what and how something should be photographed.

In another example, today, one can look stylish, contemporary, and fashionable without knowing much about fashion trends. You simply visit Zara. Any combination of the items offered at any time is guaranteed to make you look aesthetically advanced.

At the same time, aesthetics matters less than in the 1960s and 1970s – as reflected in a number of surveys of French public conducted by Bourdieu for his books. He correctly theorized in this period that aesthetic taste functions to legitimize class distinctions. The ability to enjoy high culture was associated with more refined sensibility – the privilege of certain classes defined by a combination of education, social capital and financial capital. However, today, the correlations between class and taste have weakened. If Zara can within days translate new looks of most expensive designers into its inexpensive versions, without any (or small) loss in aesthetic refinement, it becomes more challenging for anybody to distinguish themselves through clothing. The same photo filters and photo editing tools are accessible to everybody – in contrast to 1960s when more expensive equipment allowed for more aesthetic control.

Once the sophisticated aesthetic options become available to all classes, they matter less as tools of distinction. This is what I mean when say that in aesthetic society, aesthetics matters less than in previous periods.

One of the differences between the aesthetic society of early 2000s captured in Postrel's book and its more developed current version is the emergence of new platforms and tools that allow normal people to communicate their aesthetic identities without big budgets available only to companies. Perhaps the best example of such platforms is Instagram.

In the following sections of this chapter I will use this example to show how individuals create aesthetic communication using a digital networked visual platform, and also to continue the discussion of the aesthetic society in general. I will use the term *Instagramism* to refer to the aesthetic strategies employed in many Instagram images well as construction of aesthetic identities through these images. (We can also find examples of Instagramism on Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Tumblr, Line, etc.)

This term suggests an analogy to modern art movements such as futurism, cubism, surrealism, etc. Like these earlier-isms, Instagramism offers its own vision of the world and its own visual language. But unlike modernist art movements, Instagramism is shaped by millions of authors connected by and participating in Instagram and other social networks.² They influence each other and share advice on using mobile photo apps to create, edit, and sequence photos to be shared on Instagram. (See also the analysis in Tifentale, 2017).³

The word “aesthetic” is used prominently by Instagrammers and authors of advice posts and videos. For example, a search on YouTube for “insta-gram aesthetic feed” yielded 7, 200 videos, while a search for the phrase “Instagram aesthetic” on Google yielded 144,000 results (both searches performed on 22 November 2016). The same search on February 12, 2020 29, 2020 returned 1,040,000 results. Looking at Google Trends worldwide for the search term “Instagram aesthetic,” we find that these searches begin in the summer of 2014 and their volume gradually rises over next six years.

Why is this the case? All professional design fields – from car design and interior design

to interface design and food design – are concerned with aesthetic. But this is not a new situation. The creation of aesthetic objects, spaces, and experiences have always been one of design's goals. However, the word “aesthetic” is not used in design discourse, because we assume that the main goal of design is different – to create functional easy-to-use objects and systems. In amateur arts of the modern period – home photography, home movies, making clothes at home using sewing patterns from fashion magazines, and so on – this word also does not appear. Amateur creators had other goals – following exactly existing pattern, creating a durable object, enjoying the activity itself, etc.

I think that the popularity of the word “aesthetic” in Instagram discourse reflects the key role aesthetic now plays on this platform. The creation of beauty – rather than information – is what successful Instagram accounts aim at. Having a consistent visual theme is seen as a necessary condition for attracting many followers. Another such condition is posting only aesthetically pleasing photos. This is achieved in various ways – applying an Instagram filter to a photo, editing photos in other apps such as VSCO and Snapseed or in Photoshop or Lightroom, and of course, taking aesthetic into account while capturing the photo.

This use of editing software as well as time dedicated to editing each photo separates *Instagram class* from other users of the platform. I am not referring to a class in the economic sense or to a hierarchy of social groups based on wealth, education, prestige or other factors. Instead, I use this term to refer to millions of young people in many countries who use Instagram in systematic ways to create visually sophisticated feeds. Typically, they edit their photos using third-party apps such as VSCO in addition to the basic Instagram app.

Karl Marx's concept of “means of production” is useful here because Instagrammers can be said to own the means of *cultural production*. This means, however, not simply owning mobile phones and apps, but more importantly having the *skills* to use these apps, understanding Instagram's rules and strategies for creating popular feeds, and being able to apply these strategies effectively in practice. Importantly, Instagrammers do not always have to sell their skills to “capitalists” – for the most part, they use these skills to have meaningful and emotionally satisfying experiences, to meet like-minded people, to maintain relationships with other people, or to acquire social prestige.

Using these skills also creates what Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital”, which in this case is measured by numbers of followers or respect in the community. This cultural capital can be translated into economic capital if an Instagrammer starts working with advertisers and marketers to promote products in her/his feed or if their followers purchase goods or services via a linked blog or website.

Since content-creation skills and an understanding of digital platforms and styles of expression and communication are what matters here, Instagrammers can also be thought of as *knowledge workers* in a *knowledge society*.⁴

However, I would like to propose different terms: *aesthetic workers* and *aesthetic society* (i.e., the society of aesthetically sophisticated consumer goods and services). In such a society, the production and presentation of beautiful images, experiences, styles, and user-interaction designs are central to economic *and* social functioning. Rather than being a property of art, aesthetics is the key property of commercial goods and services (in this sense, “aesthetic society” cannot be equated with Guy Debord's “society of the spectacle”).

Aesthetic society values space designers, user-experience designers, architects,

photographers, models, stylists, and other design and media professionals, as well as individuals who are able to use social media, including making professional-looking media, and work with marketing and analytics tools. “Using” in this context refers to creating successful content, promoting this content, communicating with followers, and achieving desired goals. And to be successful, this content has to be *aesthetic*.

Aesthetic society is also the space in which urban/social media tribes emerge and sustain themselves through aesthetic choices and experience. According to Michel Maffesoli, who developed his analysis of the “urban tribe” back in 1980s, the term “refers to *a certain ambience*, a state of mind, and it is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favor *appearance and form*” (1996). And this ambience and state of mind are precisely the “message” of Instagramism. Whereas in “classical modern” societies carefully constructed aesthetic lifestyles were the privilege of the rich, today they are available to all who use Instagram, VSCO, or any other of more than 2,000 photo-editing apps, or shop at Zara, which offers cool, hip, and refined styles in its 3,000 stores in 99 countries (2019 data).

Three types of Instagram photographs: casual, professional, designed

I will look at three popular types of photos shared by people on Instagram and other popular media sharing networks. I call them *casual*, *professional*, and *designed*.⁵ The main purpose of casual images is to document an experience or a situation or to represent a person or a group of people. A person who captures and shares a casual photo does not try to control contrast, colors, and composition. (However, she does follow conventions that specify how different subjects should be represented and, in some cases, also dictates visual choices.) Representative function takes precedence over aesthetic function. Historically, these images continue the practices of color “home photography” that developed in the 1950s as the cost of color film processing decreased.

Professional photos are created by people who are explicitly or implicitly aware of the rules of the “professional photography” that also developed during the 20th century. The authors of these photos try to follow these rules, conventions, and techniques, which they are likely to have learned from either online tutorials, posts, videos, or classes. Thus, in my use of the term, “professional” refers not to people who earn a living from their photography but to photographs that accord with a particular aesthetic.

My third designed type refers to photos that adopt an aesthetic referring to a tradition of modernist art, design, and photography dating back to the 1920s. This aesthetic was further developed in commercial fashion, advertising, and editorial photography during the 1940s and 1950s. Note that I use “aesthetic” to refer to a combination of visual style, photo techniques, and types of content, since in Instagram photos they usually go together. These aesthetics (there are more than one) follow their own conventions, but because they have emerged very recently, they may still be less fixed than those of professional photographs. One significant difference between professional and designed images is the treatment of space. Professional photos often show spatial depth exaggerated by composition, blurred backgrounds, and choice of subjects. In contrast, designed photos often create a shallower or

flat space with strong two-dimensional rhythms more redolent of modernist abstract art and design. If the landscape and cityscape genres exemplify professional photo aesthetics, still-life and “flat lay” genres exemplify design photo aesthetics.



*Figure 9.2 Examples of *casual*, *professional*, and *designed* image types on Instagram (2015)*

Source: Each montage shows a selection of photos from a single user in the order they appear in this user's feed

I use the term “Instagramism” to refer to the aesthetics of designed photos on Instagram and other platforms. I propose that the key aspect of Instagramism is the focus on mood and atmosphere rather than the representation or communication of emotions. I also propose that Instagramism is not in dramatic opposition to “commercial” and “dominant” imagery and genres such as the lifestyle genre of photography and videography. Instead, it establishes small and subtle distinctions that set it apart from this imagery in terms of what is shown, how it is shown, and for what purpose. In contrast to the often binary differences between “high” and “low” cultures, or the clear oppositions between “mainstream” culture and “subcultures” during the 20th century as analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu, Dick Hebdige, and others, Instagramism uses alternative mechanisms, and in doing so, it participates in the larger aesthetics movement of the early 21st century that is exemplified by the “normcore” style.

High/low and mainstream/subculture distinctions corresponded to class differences in income, types of occupations, background, and education. In contrast, I see Instagramism as the aesthetic of the new global digital youth class that emerged in the early 2010s. This class partially overlaps with the global Adobe class.

A screenshot of the Behance website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for "Behance", "Log in", and "Sign up". Below the navigation is a search bar with the placeholder "Search Behance...". Underneath the search bar, there are buttons for "All results", "People", and "Moodboards". On the left side, there is a sidebar titled "All Creative Fields" with a list of categories: Architecture, Art Direction, Branding, Fashion, Graphic Design, Illustration, Industrial Design, Interaction Design, Motion Graphics, Photography, UI/UX, and Web Design. To the right of the sidebar, there are several project cards displayed in a grid. One card for the "Museum of Iceland" is visible, along with others for "Review 2019 / Prospectus" and "Chernobyl Dream Terror". The bottom of the page includes a footer with links for "More Behance", "English", "TOS", "Privacy", "Community", "Help", and "Advertisers".

Figure 9.3 Behance.com home page (accessed December 2019). The pull-down menu shows creative-field categories available for members to share their portfolios.

The “Adobe class” is my term for young professionally educated creatives working in design, video, social media, or fashion. Adobe Creative Cloud software dominates the market for design and media authoring. As of September 2016, there were over eight million registered software users worldwide. We can alternatively refer to the Adobe class as the “Behance class”. Behance.net is the leading global portfolio-sharing platform. It is owned by Adobe and integrated with Adobe media-creation software, so a designer can directly share her/his work on Behance from Adobe applications. At the end of 2015, Behance reported that it had six million registered users.

Our junior lab researcher Zizi Li contacted twenty-four Instagram users who have feeds of well-designed photos to ask if they had any formal education in art, design, photography, or any other creative fields, or if they worked in any of these fields at present. Half the responders had such education and/or positions; the other half did not.

Instagramism vs. “normal” photography

Instagramism does not dramatically oppose commercial visual aesthetics. For example, on browsing stock and microstock photography sites such as Shutterstock, 500px, and dozens of others (Schreiber, 2016), we see many photos from the lifestyle and food categories that are very similar to many personal photos on Instagram.

But how is the aesthetic of Instagram designed photos related to the aesthetics of casual and professional photo types? In modern society, aesthetics, styles, and cultural choices often have to define themselves in opposition to each other. In contrast to earlier human societies, which were often completely isolated, modern culture is structural in Saussure’s sense. Because many types of cultural “positions” (i.e., aesthetics, ideals, sensibilities, ideologies, interpretations) coexist, their creators and promoters have to define these positions in opposition to each other. More generally, we can say that they are deliberately positioned sufficiently far from one another in a competitive cultural landscape.⁶

So how do you define the aesthetics of designed photos using Instagram affordances? How do we create Instagram *cool*? The answer is by opposing popular image aesthetics (i.e., the types of photo conventions that we think of as normal, mainstream, and popular).⁷

For example, whereas casual portraits and self-portraits (e.g., selfies) tend to show full figures of one or more people arranged symmetrically in the center, designed photos tend rather to show parts of bodies positioned off-center and cut by a frame (think of Degas). They also avoid showing faces directly looking into the camera. (See our discussion of the “anti-selfie” genre in Tifentale and Manovich, 2016.)

Similarly, whereas casual and professional photos favor landscapes and cityscape genres and often exaggerate the perspective and sense of spatial depth, designed photos flatten the space and use large areas empty of any details. (In terms of lenses or zoom levels, this is analogous to the contrast between the wide-angle and telephoto view, which flattens the space.)

Strategies involving frame-cut faces and bodies and flat space align designed Instagram

photography with the first generation of “mobile photography” developed by Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, and other New Vision photographers in the 1920s and early 1930s. They created the visual aesthetics of “making strange” by practicing visual strategies that similarly opposed popular taste (i.e., symmetrical compositions, full figures, and faces looking into the camera). Using the affordances of the first compact 35mm Leica camera, which was released in 1925, New Vision photographers developed a different visual language: observing the subject at a 60 to 90 degree angle from below or above, diagonal compositions, showing only parts of objects and people, high contrast, and geometric shadows that flatten the shapes and space and interfere with shape perception. In other words, they were making photography that was defamiliarizing reality, thus creating a visual analog of the *ostranenie* effect described by Viktor Shklovsky in 1917, but in relation to literature. And, like many other avant-garde visual movements of the 1910s and 1920s, they made perception difficult – by abandoning the visual strategies of “normal” photography. That is to say, simply understanding the content of many of their photos required an increased cognitive effort because the compositions and subjects of these photos did not immediately trigger familiar cognitive frames.⁸

Casual and professional photos adopt a set of visual conventions to document events, people, and situations that follow accepted social norms – for example, taking a group photo at meetings, conferences, and trips. Designed photos express an urban/hipster sensibility that opposes these norms. This opposition is constructed using another set of norms – that of contemporary (2010–) design culture. How does this work?

The creators of designed photos find or stage unique moments, feelings, and states of being – in space, in time, with other people, with objects important to them. But rather than directly negating square reality through a strong alternative aesthetics (as hippies did in the 1960s), contemporary Instagram hipsters are often happy to subscribe to the styles of global consumer minimalism. Their Instagram photos and feeds (this term refers to all photos added by a user to her/his account over time) represent our current historical period, in which 20th-century oppositions – art and commerce, individual and corporate, natural and fabricated, raw and edited – are blended together. The Instagram hipster effortlessly navigates between these positions, without experiencing them as contradictions.

Faces and bodies

Now, let’s think about the frequent subjects of designed photos. They are “spreads” or “flat lays”: photos of separate objects, parts of a body arranged with the object spreads or separate objects, parts of a body (such as hands holding objects or pointing) with landscapes or cityscapes, a full body positioned toward the edge or corner in a scene.



Figure 9.4 Examples of visual strategies used in designed photo type

Source: Selected photos from the Instagram feed @recklesstonight (Kiev, Ukraine), shared during October–December 2015

Is there any common pattern in these subjects? Yes: it is the presence of the Instagrammer’s body in the designed photos. But these representations do not follow mainstream portrait conventions. Instead, they deliberately oppose these conventions by showing hands, fingers, feet, or complete figures in situations: waking up, enjoying a relaxing coffee moment, surrounded by objects, pointing toward the landscape or objects in the cityscape, from the back, and so on. This set of strategies is not found in the commercial and advertising photography published today or earlier in the 20th century, and it also did not exist in New Vision photography.

The original use of the term “hipster” in the 1940s was associated with hot jazz. This association, in turn, allows us to better understand the meaning of hipness in Instagramism. Lives of Instagrammers as presented in their feeds can be compared to the unique improvised experiences of jazz players as opposed to the planned and routine life of “squares”.

Today, the enhanced contrast, saturation, and/or colors; the use of diagonals; and the appearance of objects and bodies cut by an image frame in designed Instagram photos are signs of immersion and of life as improvisation. In choosing and representing (or staging and designing) such a style of existence, Instagram authors echo the behavior of the original American hipsters of the 1940s and 1950s:

The hipster world that Kerouac and Ginsberg drifted in and out of from the mid-1940s to the early-1950s was an amorphous movement without ideology, more a pose than an attitude; a way of “being” without attempting to explain why.... The division was *hip* and *square*. Squares sought security and conned themselves into political acquiescence. Hipsters, hip to the bomb, sought the meaning of life and, expecting death, demanded it now.

Of course, when looking at many examples of contemporary Instagramism, it is possible to argue that the “life as improvisation” the authors show is completely staged and planned by them. But the reality is more complicated. The boundary between authentic and staged, improvised and planned is not always clear. For example, if an author does some basic edits on the photos, somewhat increasing brightness, contrast, and sharpness, at what point do we declare this photo to be “calculated” rather than “authentic”?

Instagram themes

As Instagram continued to attract more and more users, and as brands discovered Instagram, many authors learned that they could use their feeds as advertising for their small business or freelance work, as a way to supplement their income by promoting products sent to them by companies, or to completely support themselves by becoming influencers. As a result, the number of photos and feeds that were carefully planned quickly increased. A range of evidence suggests that this shift took place during 2014 and 2015.

One very strong example of this structuration of Instagram is the emergence of strong rules one has to follow to attract a large number of followers. The first rule: develop a particular style and use it for all the photos in your feed.

By 2015, we see even more structure. In addition to the established term “style”, the term “theme” starts to dominate how-to advice, posts, and help videos. A theme may combine certain subjects, a particular color palette, and a certain contrast choice.

Using Google Trends and the search phrase “Instagram theme ideas”, I found that the global web search traffic for this phrase started to increase in January 2014, and then flattened by June 2015. YouTube has hundreds of thousands of how-to videos about Instagram editing, strategies, and theme ideas. On 19 November 2016, I searched YouTube for a few relevant phrases that appear in video titles. Here are those phrases and the numbers of video returned. (Note that to find only directly relevant videos, I entered the search phrases in quotes.)

- “how i edit my instagram photos” – 131,000 videos.
- “how i edit my instagram pictures” – 48,600 videos.
- “how i edit my instagram photos white theme” – 20,000 videos.
- “how i edit my instagram minimal theme” – 6,130 videos.

Many of these videos are very popular, registering hundreds of thousands of views in the few months following their publication. This can partly be explained by the fact that many videos in this genre feature young female authors. But there are also many popular videos that feature young and equally hip male authors. Here are just a few examples of the videos and numbers of views (as of 19 November 2016):

- “How I Edit My Instagram Pictures + My Theme”, published on 19 July 2016, 421,000 views.
- “How I edit my Instagram pictures! | Minimal aesthetic”, published on 7 August 2016,

231,000 views.

“34 Instagram Themes”, published on 8 June 2016, 187,000 views.

Using a theme does not mean that all photos in one feed should be similar. On the contrary, you have to have enough variety, but this variety also has to be structured. This is the second rule of Instagramism: establish and follow a particular temporal pattern for your feed. Never post similar photos next to each other, but instead alternate between a few types in a systematic way. Create an interesting formal temporal rhythm, alternating between compositions, color palettes, or other variables. And if the goal of your feed is to feature products, place enough photos of other subjects in between product photos.

Designing photo sequences

The mobile Instagram app allows users to view photos in a few different ways. (Details here refer to the Instagram app interface in the mid-2010s.) The gallery view shows nine photos organized in a three-by-three grid. The order of photos corresponds to the dates and times they were shared on Instagram, with newer photos appearing first. Scrolling down reveals the earlier photos. Clicking on a single photo in a grid brings a new view. It shows a larger version of the photo, along with other information: number of likes, comments, posted date and time. This screen also allows a user to perform a number of functions such as “like”, “comment”, and “share”. (For an analysis of the Instagram interface, see Hochman and Manovich, 2013.) Finally, a user also has another view, which shows all photos shared by all the authors he or she follows. Since this timeline is also sorted by date/time, the photos of a given author appear between the photos of all these other authors.

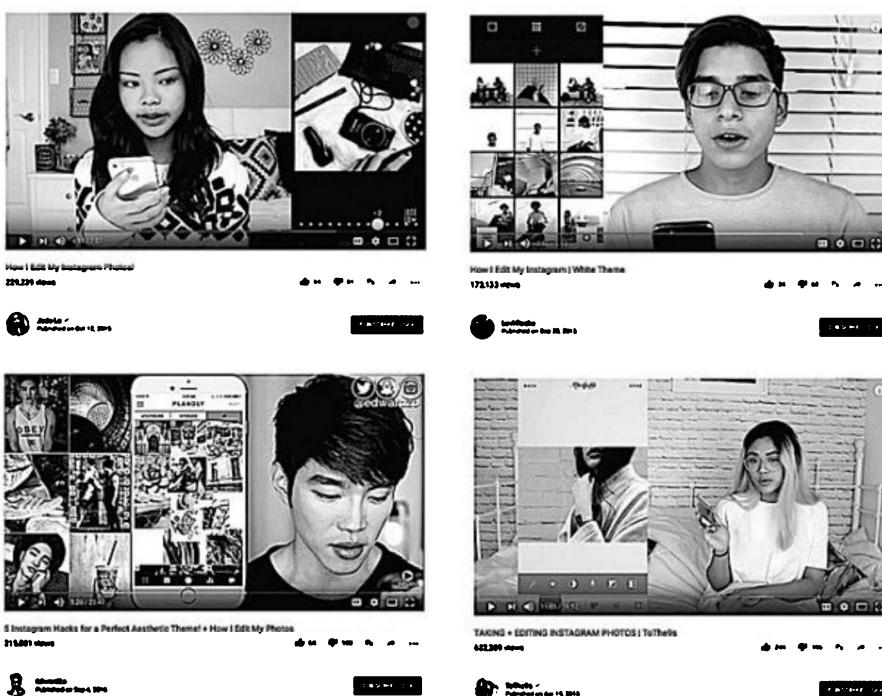


Figure 9.5 Screenshots from YouTube “How I edit my Instagram” videos, captured 24

December 2016

Source: In such videos, the presentation often includes shots of an author speaking to the audience while showing photo-editing apps and image gallery, as we see in these screenshots

Since time is such an important dimension of the Instagram interface and user experience, many Instagrammers design their feeds accordingly as aesthetic experiences in time. They employ special sequencing techniques that respond to the ways their photos are viewed by others, which I listed earlier.

Given the two rules for “good Instagram feeds”, we can divide Instagram authors into two corresponding types. Some control the characteristics of all or at least most of their individual photos but make no attempt to sequence them in any particular way. Others control both the aesthetics of individual photos and the overall aesthetics of a sequence.

For the latter type of authors (who can be individuals, professional bloggers, influencers, or companies), the sequence aesthetic takes priority over any individual photos. No matter how interesting a particular photo is, the author does not post it if it breaks the established rhythm and theme. The blog post called “How to Establish Your Instagram Aesthetic” (Nadine, 2015) explains this:

Resist the urge to post things that won’t fit in. It might be tempting to post something funny or beautiful that doesn’t fit in with the look you’ve chosen. At some point, you’ll have a photo you desperately want to post but it just doesn’t work.

A post called “Reimaging Your Instagram Profile” (Dana, 2015) from another blog provides these suggestions:

Come up with a theme and stick with it. Maybe you love colorful and bright photos, or maybe only black and white photos. Maybe you post drawings, or photos of lovely landscapes. Your formula should help your photos appear as if they are part of a set. Like they belong together.

One male Instagrammer explained in an interview in 2014 how he used small photo printouts to design the sequence of his photos before starting his Instagram account. He quickly gathered over 50,000 followers purely on the strength of his individual photos and his sequencing. I am highlighting this author because his feed does not include any photos with a popular type of content that used to attract likes and followers, such as spectacular views of exotic landscapes, young females in swimsuits, or pretty female faces. In 2016, it became common among Instagrammers to have two Instagram accounts. One is for the public; the second is private and used to lay out sequences and see if new photos fit the theme and established rhythm before they are added to the public account.

The authors who design both individual photos and their sequences may be considered the true “Instagram professionals”. They do not follow the rules of “good photography” and strategies developed well before Instagram for different photo capture and edit technologies, publication and exhibition platforms, and circulation and feedback mechanisms. Instead, they systematically exploit the specific properties, affordances, advantages, and limitations of the medium Instagram.

Appropriation, subcultures, tribes, mainstream?

In contrast to the influential analysis of the styles of subcultures in Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), I do not see the Instagram aesthetic of designed photos as a form of symbolic resistance. Young Insta-gram hipsters do not resist the mainstream; they coexist with it and are not afraid to borrow its elements or show how much they enjoy commercial products and their favorite brands.

Instagramism is not about binary differences from the mainstream. It is about the selection and combination of particular elements drawn from



Figure 9.6 Examples of sequence strategies used by two Instagram authors (I selected a sequence of 30 photos posted sequentially from each author account)

Source: The photos are sorted in the order they appear in the Instagram feed (left to right, top to bottom). The two authors, with their number of followers as of 6 May 2016, are:

@sex_on_water. Country: Russia (Saint Petersburg) Followers: 48,000
Self-description: “Evgeniya Iokar. Traveller+Photographer+Blogger+Barista”
@tienphuc. Country: Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City), Followers: 3,815
Self-description: “Graphic Designer+Photographer”
www.facebook.com/kenneth.nguyen2295

different contemporary and historical universes, including commercial offerings.⁹

Our standard model of modern and contemporary cultures assumes that new styles, sounds, art forms, ways of behaving, and other cultural strategies and imaginaries are typically created by small subcultures and then later appropriated by commercial-culture producers, who package them into products sold to the masses. And, indeed, there are numerous examples of such appropriations, narratives in which the part of the original inventor is played by, among others, the European Modernists of the 1920s, the Paris Surrealists of the 1930s, the Beat Generation in late 1940s in NYC, Northern California hippies in the 1960s, hip-hop in the Bronx in the early 1970s, or Williamsburg in Brooklyn in the late 1990s.

Does the Instagram hip generation fit into this model? In my view, Instagrammers are not an avant-garde creating something entirely new, a subculture that defines itself in opposition to the mainstream, or the masses consuming commodified versions of aesthetics developed earlier by certain subcultures. They are more similar to Maffesoli's tribes but exist in the digital global Instagram “city” rather than as “villages” in a physical city.¹⁰ (According to Maffesoli, a tribe “refers to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and it is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that appear and form”.)

If the creation of something new by small subcultures or modernist art movements represents a first stage, and later appropriation and packaging for the masses represent a second stage in modern cultural evolution, then the “cultural logic” of Instagramism represents a third stage: Instagrammers appropriating elements of commercial products and offerings to create their own aesthetics. Instagram and other visual global networks quickly disseminate these aesthetic forms worldwide.

As opposed to the movement of cultural innovation from individuals and small groups to companies and then the masses as described by the appropriation model, we also now have other types of movements enabled by social networks: from individuals and groups to other individuals and groups. The industry borrows as much from these individuals and groups as it influences them. (This logic was already anticipated in the emergence of coolhunting research in the early 1990s. See Brodmerkel and Carah, 2016.)

On Instagram, one operates in a truly global space not constrained by local physical and geographical reality. Although there are many paid photo-editing apps available, both Instagram and enough powerful third-party editing apps are free. Among young people in most countries in Asia, South America, and Eastern Europe today, mobile phone and social media use is as high as or even higher than in the developed Western economies. The same fashion and lifestyle magazines, perfect cappuccino and latte cups, fashion items, and brands of sport shoes can appear in photos from almost anywhere in the world where there are young people who use Instagram. Certainly, because of the differences in income, fewer people in developing countries can afford global brands like Zara or Uniqlo, but there are enough local brands that are cheaper and make products that look equally good.

In physical reality, local norms constrain how people dress and behave. Compare New

York's Chelsea and Lower East Side, Seoul's Garosu-gil, and the Harajuku area in Tokyo. You hardly see any color besides black in New York; in Seoul, a white/gray/black palette is the norm; in Harajuku, it is combinations of complementary (warm and cold) bright saturated colors and pastels. Each cultural norm offers plenty of space for variations and individualization – Tokyo street fashion was the most extreme well-known example of such variations in the 2000s. A cultural norm constrains choices only on a few dimensions but not on others. So while my examples focus on only one type of Instagram-designed aesthetics that we found in images from many countries, it would be very interesting to investigate other types of Instagram aesthetics that reflect other local aesthetic norms.

In this chapter I used Instagram example to advance the larger ideas of *aesthetic society* and *aesthetic workers*. This society begins to emerge in the second part of 1990s. Since that time, we see the process of aestheticization advancing relentlessly and systematically. Theoretically, there is no end point at which aestheticization will fully saturate every area of our everyday life and communication – new technologies, new materials and manufacture methods can be always used to create new aesthetics which did not exist before, offer new types of aesthetic effects, and also advance aestheticization through individualization. The fascinating question which this chapter did not address is what changes we might expect in image aesthetics in the future? I believe that we will see further advances – and just as it occurred with image editing that first required expensive computer workstations and eventually migrated to free platforms such as Instagram – these advances will be used by many millions of people rather than only by a few professionals.

Notes

1 An earlier version of the larger part of this text was published under the title “Designing and Living Instagram Photography: Themes, Feeds, Sequences, Branding, Faces, Bodies”, as the fourth part of my book *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2017). <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image>.

2 Photo-editing app VSCO, which is considered the standard among sophisticated Instagrammers, had 30 million active users at the beginning of 2016.

3 A note about two terms that frequently appear in this chapter: “aesthetics” and “class”. The words “aesthetics” and “aesthetic” are used prominently by Instagrammers and authors of advice posts and videos. For example, a search on YouTube for “Instagram aesthetic feed” yields 7,200 videos, while a search for the phrase “Instagram aesthetic” on Google yields 144,000 results (both searches performed on 22 November 2016). The same search on Google on 29 January 2020 yielded 1,040,000 results.

4 Peter Drucker coined the term “knowledge worker” in 1957, writing that “the most valuable asset of a 21st-century institution, whether business or non-business, will be its knowledge workers and their productivity”. See Drucker (1959).

5 My discussion of these types is based on a quantitative analysis conducted in my Cultural Analytics Lab of 16 million geo-tagged images shared on Instagram in 17 global cities from 2012 through 2016, as well as my own observations as an Instagram user. To be sure, there are other

types of images; moreover, since social media platforms, their users, and their content keep evolving, I do not want to make claims about the applicability of my analysis to every geographical location or to periods outside of 2012 through 2016.

- 6 The metaphor of a landscape containing a number of cultural items situated at particular distances from one another is not my invention. Marketing research uses a set of methods called perceptual mapping to analyze and diagram customer perceptions of relations between competing products or brands. Relative positions and cognitive distances between any cultural artifacts, authors, genres, styles, and aesthetic systems can also be analyzed and visualized using this approach. In many of our lab's projects, we create such maps to visualize the results of computational analyses of characteristics of large sets of cultural artifacts.
- 7 The term "cool" and the related term "hipster" became popular in the 1960s, when they were opposed to the term "square", which is not commonly used today. See Wikipedia, 2016a).
- 8 Of course, as these strategies were gradually adopted in commercial design circles such as magazine covers and layouts, they became cultural stereotypes that are predictable and therefore easier to recognize and process cognitively. On the role of stereotypes, "exposure effect", and "cognitive fluency" in the cognitive processing of design, see MacKay (2015).
- 9 In the contemporary visual creative industry, this remix logic was best realized in my view in collections by a number of fashion designers created between 1993 and 2006, leading figures among whom were Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, and Jean Paul Gaultier.
- 10 See Bennett (1999) for an overview of the concepts of "subculture" and "tribe" in the sociology of culture.

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