The Aesthetic Society, or "How I Edit My Instagram"[1]

Lev Manovich

(This text was written in 2016-2017 and revised in 2019. Some of the descriptions of Instagram's aesthetics and strategies used to achieve them refer to the 2013-2016 period. For example, in this period officially you could not post to Instagram photos captured or edited in other applications – the practice that became normal and supported by Instagram itself years later. Furthermore, new designed aesthetics appeared the one I focus on in this text. However, I believe that the main ideas I develop here – aesthetic society, Instagram class, ambience as the main subject of Instagrammism, the disappearance of the oppositions between mainstream, subcultures and avant-garde , global tribes – remain valid.)

Abstract:

We live in *aesthetic* society (i.e., the society of aesthetically sophisticated consumer goods and services). In such a society, the production of beautiful images, interfaces, objects and experiences, are central to *economic and social* functioning. Rather than being a property of art, sophisticated aesthetics becomes the key property of commercial goods and services. 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 beautiful and refined images, 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. This article analyses one area of the aesthetic society that became particularly important in 2010s – Instagram. I discuss a few photo types shared on Instagram: casual, professional, and designed. I then cover in detail the strategies used by Instagram authors to create the designed images.

Who are these authors and what does their Instagram aesthetic production tells us about culture in the 21st century? I invoke four relevant terms proposed to describe modern cultures earlier: mainstream, hipsters, subcultures, tribes. I suggest that instagrammers are neither an avant-garde creating something entirely new, nor subcultures that define themselves in opposition to the mainstream, nor the masses consuming commodified versions of aesthetics developed earlier by certain subcultures. They are more similar to Michel Maffesoli's tribes but exist in the digital global Instagram "city" rather than as "villages" in a physical city. According to 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). Such ambience and state of mind are the "message" of Instagramism, but now expanded worldwide and crafted through photography.

The earlier version of this text was published online in 2017 under CC license as part of my *Instagram and Contemporary Image* book I published under CC license in 2017.)

Figure 0. Author's Instagram home page, December 17, 2019.
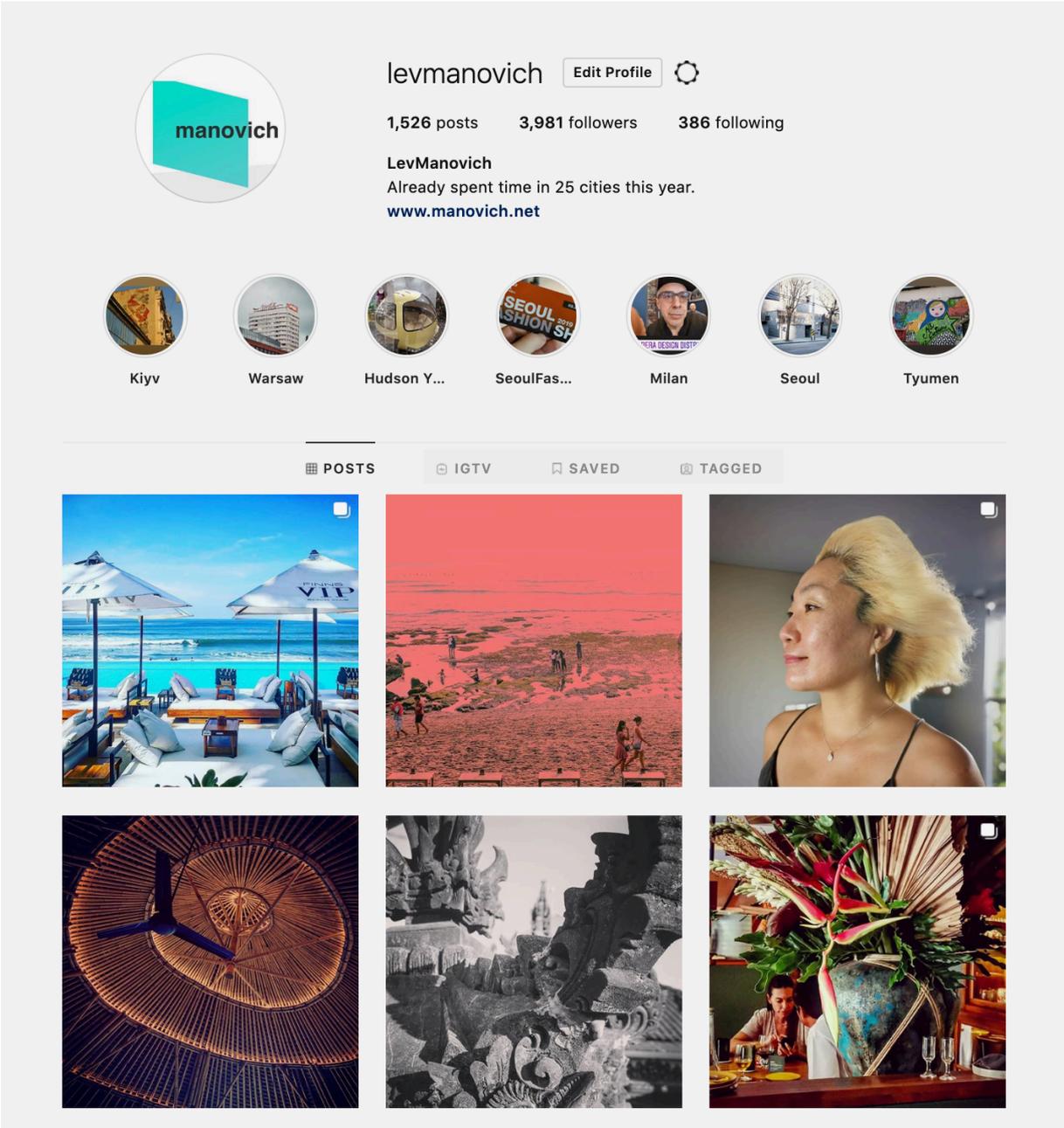
"The dizzying growth of metropolises (megalopolises, rather) as demographers inform us, can only foster the development of 'villages within the city.'"

"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* (1998)

"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. At the time, my small village in Lancashire was also home to slightly older greasers (or smellies), rather impoverished New Romantics, a few Northern Soulers, some Two-toners, a tiny band of latterday hippies in Afghan coats, some electronic music fans, and a couple of narcissistic Roxy Music idolaters."

"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)

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 millions of people. This article analyses one area of the aesthetic society that became particularly important in 2010s – Instagram. I propose the term *instagramism* to refer to the aesthetic strategies employed in many Instagram images (of course we can also find such Instagramism on Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Tumblr, Line, etc.) as well as construction of aesthetic identities through these images.

I use the term *Instagramism* to suggest 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]

When I talk about the *Instagram class*, 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 have to always sell their skills to "capitalists" – for the most part, they use these skills to have meaningful and emotionally satisfying experiences, to meet likeminded people, to maintain relationships with other people, or to acquire social prestige.

Using these skills also creates what Pierre Bourdieu called *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 her 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 be also 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*.

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 2000 photo-editing apps, or shop at Zara, which offers cool, hip and refined styles in its 3000 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, 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, colours, and composition. (However, she does follow conventions that specify how different subjects should be represented, and in some cases also dictate visual choices.) Representative function takes precedence over aesthetic function. Historically these images continue the practices of colour "home photography" that developed in the 1950s as the cost of colour film processing decreased.
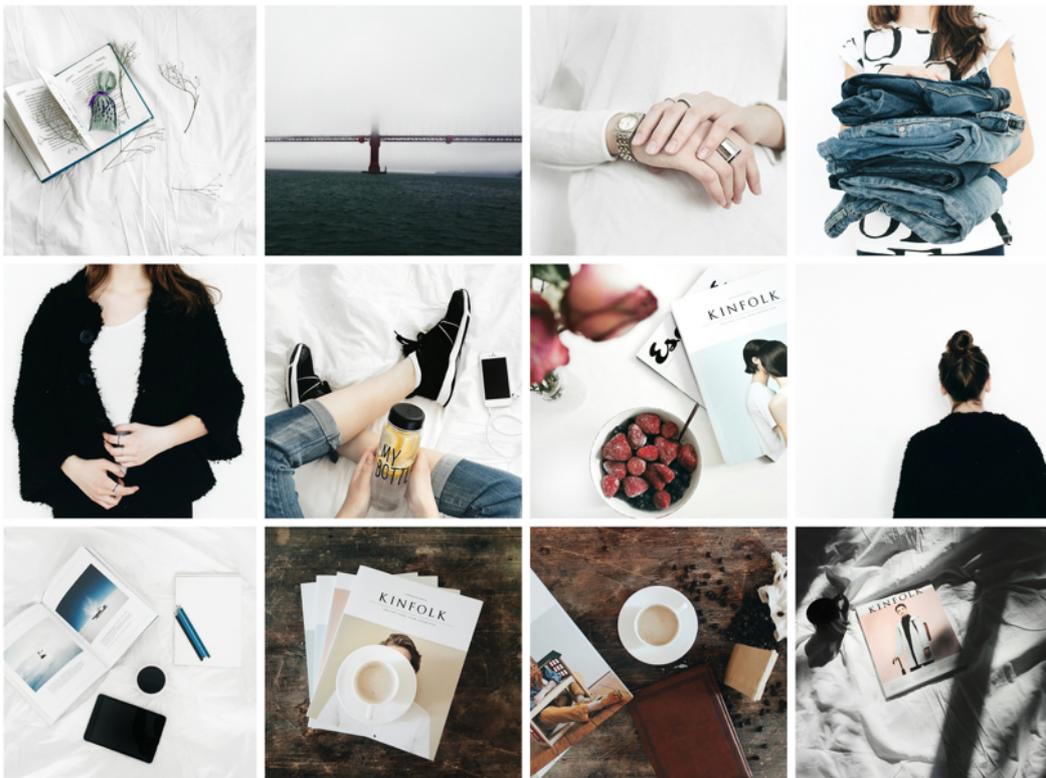
Figure 1. Examples of *casual*, *professional*, and *designed* image types on Instagram (2015). Each montage shows a selection of photos from a single user in the order they appear in this user's feed. (a) – casual; (b) – professional; (c) designed.
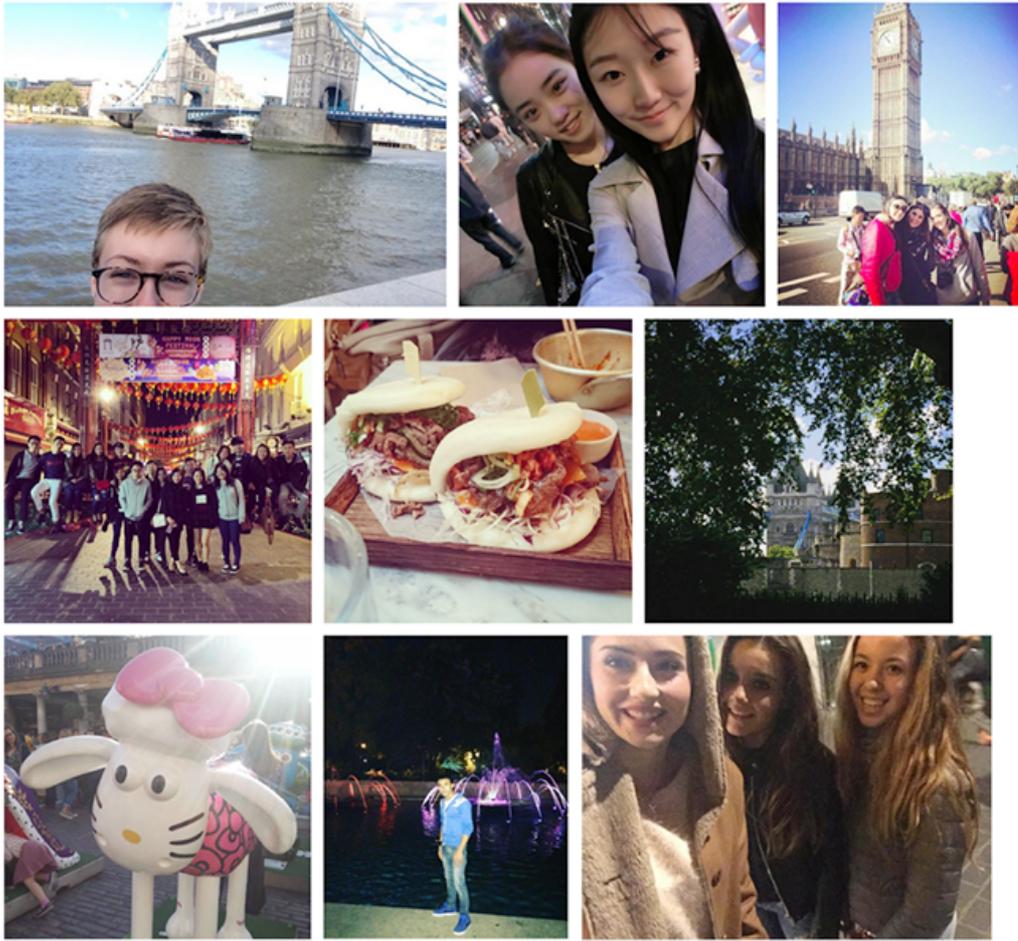
(a)
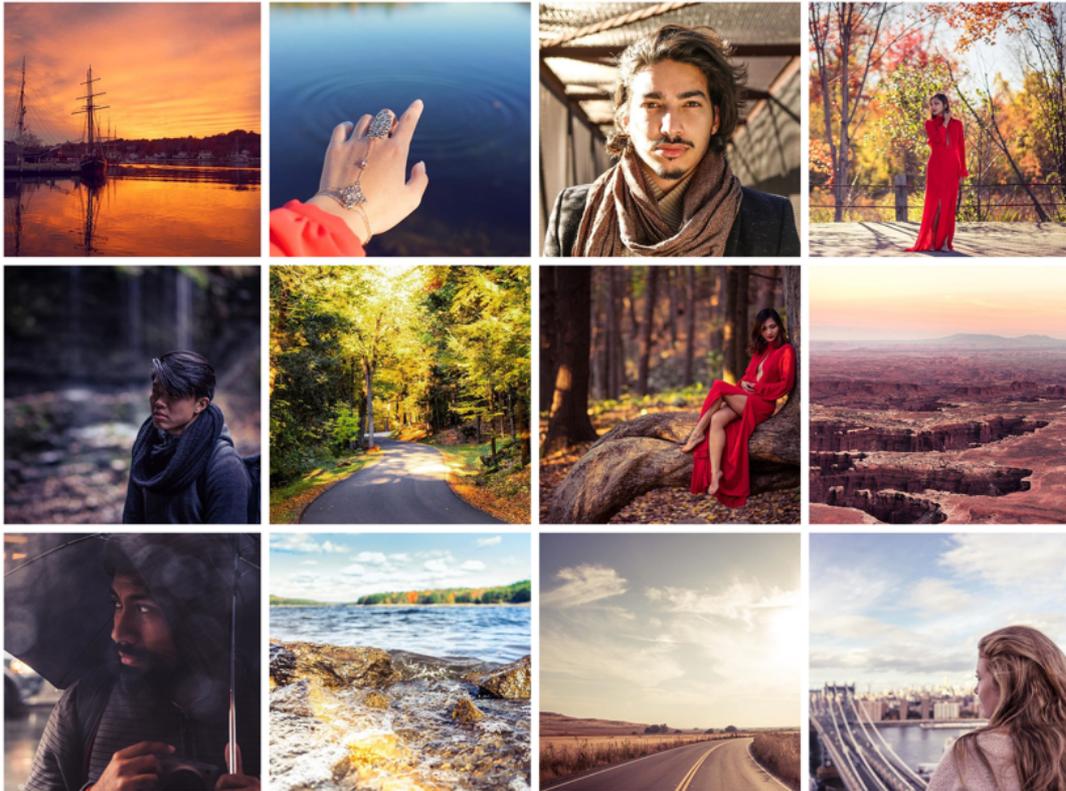
(b)

(c)

Professional photos are created by people who are explicitly or implicitly aware of the rules of the "professional photography" that also developed during the twentieth 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–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 is more than one) follow their own conventions, but because they have emerged very recently, they may still be less fixed than that 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.

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 twentieth century as analysed 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 twenty-first 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*.

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 09/2016, there were over 8 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 of the responders had such education and/or positions; the other half did not.

Figure 2. Behance.com home page (accessed December 2019). The pull-down menu shows creative-field categories available for members to share their portfolios.
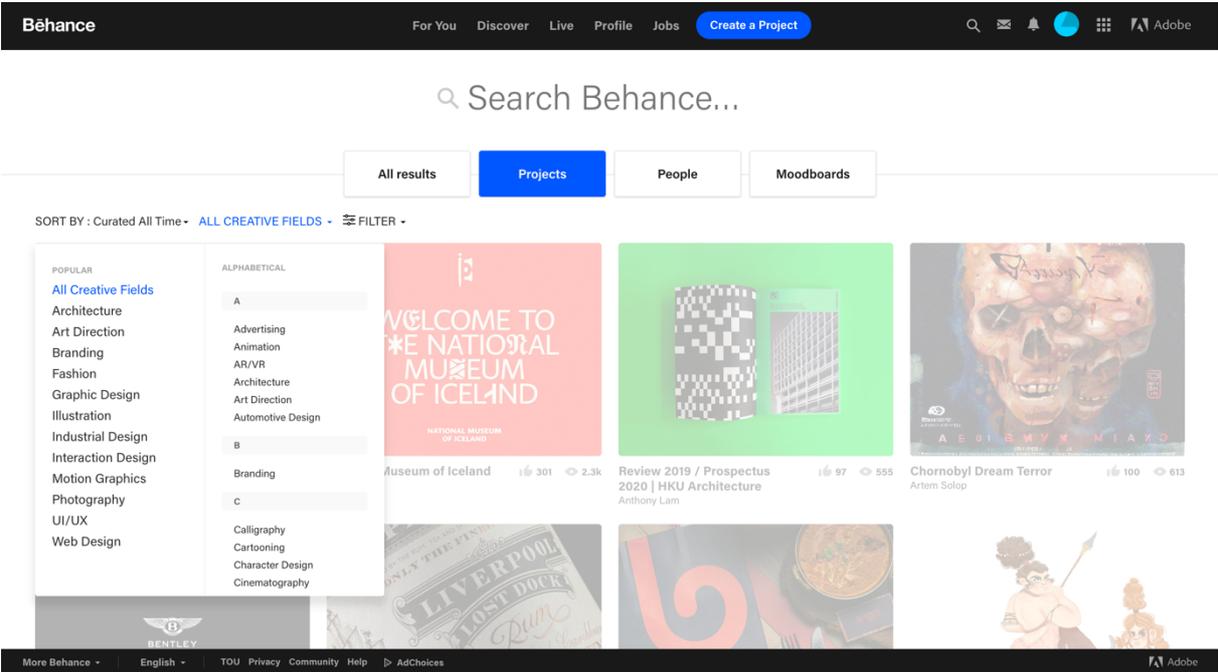
Instagramism vs. "Normal" Photography

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) co-exist, 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 centre, *designed* photos tend rather to show parts of bodies positioned off-centre 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 & Manovich, 2016).

Similarly, whereas *casual* and *professional* photos favour 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 analogue 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]

Figure 3. Examples of visual strategies used in *designed* images on instagram. Selected photos from the Instagram feed @recklesstonight (Kiev, Ukraine) shared during October - December 2015.
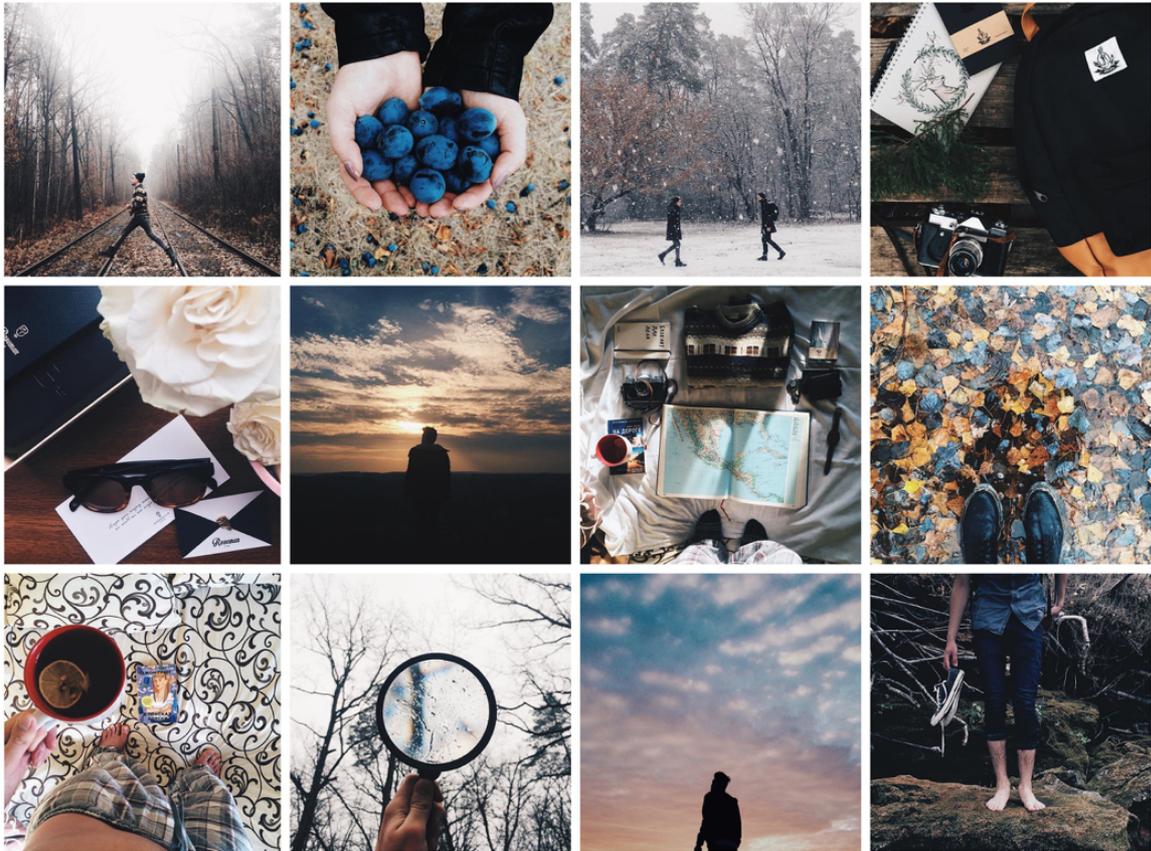
Casual and *professional* photos adopt a set of visual conventions to document events,

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 twentieth-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 towards the edge or corner in a scene.

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 towards 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 twentieth century, and it also did not exist in New Vision photography.

My suggested interpretation of these Instagramism strategies is as follows. The Instagram author is not a Renaissance or Modernist observer situated *outside of the scene* s/he records according to perspectival rules. Instead, she is *in the scene*, *in the situation*, *in the moment*. (See the section on the "antiselfie" in Tifentale & Manovich, 2016.) To achieve this effect, the author often has to be photographed in the scene by somebody else. This is similar to a third-person narrative in literature, or a third-person viewpoint in video games, where the virtual camera is positioned behind the character the player is currently controlling.

And in a certain sense, hipster life as recorded/staged in a series of Instagram photos is similar to video games which use first-person/third-person narrators. In the case of Instagram, the narrative is about the author travelling through the world, encountering other people and objects, participating in interesting situations, and having emotionally satisfying experiences. Like a person navigating worlds in a game – and unlike a tourist observing from a distance – the contemporary Instragrammer is immersed in experiences, moments and situations. (On the concepts of immersion and presence in the study of video games, see Denisova & Cairns, 2015.) And whereas a tourist is often looking for the unique and exotic, the Instagrammer's focus is often on the familiar and everyday: being in a favourite cafe and visiting other favourite places in the city she lives

in, or simply being in her well-designed apartment or even one aesthetically controlled corner of that apartment. Rather than her experiences travelling to faraway locations, the most important subject is being in her everyday space! Rather than the tourist's view of the outside world, the focus is on *interior lifestyle*– although Instagram is certainly also characterized by the popular theme of the *nomad*, presenting a diary of a person who never stays too long in one area.

The original use of the term hipster in the 1940 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 experience*s of jazz players as opposed to the *planned and routine life* of "squares."

Today, the enhanced contrast, saturation and/or colours, 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 behaviour of the original American hipsters of the 1940s–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. (Jezer, 1982)

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, or 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 2014–2015.

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 phrase 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.

Figure 4. Screenshots from YouTube "how I edit my Instagram" videos, captured 24 December 2016. 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.

How I Edit My Instagram Photos!
229,239 views
Jade Lo
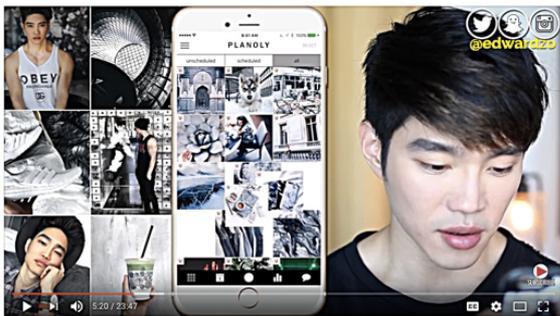Published on Oct 12, 2015
SUBSCRIBE 156K

How I Edit My Instagram | White Theme
173,133 views
Levi Rocha
Published on Sep 20, 2015
SUBSCRIBE 21K

5 Instagram Hacks for a Perfect Aesthetic Theme! + How I Edit My Photos
215,051 views
EdwardZo
Published on Sep 4, 2016
SUBSCRIBE 72K

TAKING + EDITING INSTAGRAM PHOTOS | ToThe9s
622,209 views
ToThe9s
Published on Apr 19, 2016
SUBSCRIBE 462K

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 11/19/2016):

"How I Edit My Instagram Pictures + My Theme," published on 07/19/2916, 421,000 views.

"How I edit my Instagram pictures! | Minimal aesthetic," published on 08/07/2016, 231,000 views.

20

"34 Instagram Themes," published on 06/08/2016, 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, colour 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 below refer to the Instagram app interface in the mid 2010s.) The gallery view shows nine photos organized in a 3 x 3 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 & Manovich, 2013). Finally, a user also has another view which shows all photos shared by all the authors s/he 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.

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 have listed above.

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. Resist the urge to post it anyway and take to Twitter. Any photos that don't fit in my Instagram aesthetic go straight to Twitter. Sometimes they are photos that followers would truly enjoy but one photo that is outside of your chosen aesthetic might look odd in your feed.

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. Maybe you like styling posts or taking close ups of objects. This doesn't mean creating the same photo again and again, it just means using that basic idea to inspire your next photo. Find the formula that works for you and that can easily and quickly be adapted to your future photos…*Your formula should help your photos appear as if they are part of a set. Like they belong together*. Try not to break the chain – breaking the chain of related photos using your formula is sometimes difficult. You don't have to post every single photo you take, just the ones that are superb… so try to at least make those ones match the rest.

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.

Figure 5. Examples of sequence strategies used by two Instagram authors. I selected a sequence of 30 photos posted sequentially from each author account. 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: 3815. Self-description: "Graphic Designer+Photographer." https://www.facebook.com/kenneth.nguyen2295

Learning *Instagramism*

For a few years I have been following a number of Instagram authors who have perfectly designed individual photos and photo sequences in their feeds. From the outset, I suspected that most do not have any art, photography or design-school training. The descriptions below their photos, blogs, and YouTube channels linked to their Instagram accounts and occasional statement of ages reveal that many of these authors are in school, and that some are only 13–16 years old, which means that they have certainly not yet studied art or design at a university. Additionally, these Instagrammers are not necessarily based in larger metropolitan centres – many are living in smaller cities.

However, as I see it, their visual sophistication, their skills in using Instagram, and the overall quality of their feeds are often superior to that of the big commercial brands and adult, professionally trained image makers. Where do these individual users learn this? A likely explanation is that at least some of these sophisticated young users learn by following and studying others who use the medium well, and by "soaking up" design principles from numerous well-designed web sites, blogs and apps, along with well-designed physical objects and spaces – although for young people living in small locations far from larger cities, online resources such as YouTube "how to" videos and blog posts certainly have to be the major, if not the only, source.

The volume of YouTube videos where Instagrammers show how they edit individual photos, explain how to create a theme, and give other advice, as well as the number of

views these videos attract, suggest that the number of "Instagram professionals" is very large, and has been gradually growing since Instagram's inception. The authors of such videos are often teenagers or young adults in their early twenties. One popular genre among Instagram's advice videos is, as already mentioned, the "How I edit my Instagram?" (131,000 videos as of 20 November 2016). In this video genre, the author demonstrates the process s/he follows when editing each of their photos before they are posted. The author works on a single photo using a few different apps such as VSCO and Snapseed in a sequence. There are currently hundreds of third-party mobile photo editing apps available for both Apple and Android phones, and thousands of articles that review and compare them. Each app is used for particular types of edits, before the photo in question is moved on to the next app. (For an analysis of similar professionally designed workflows in which a project is moved from one application to the next see Manovich, 2013).

In this way, the author applies a number of edits (which may or may not include applying a filter) both to improve a photo and make sure that it fits with her aesthetic and theme. Another popular type of video is a tour of the author's phone screens showing all her photo-editing apps, with explanations of which photo-editing app should be used when. Some authors have 15–20 editing apps on their phones. Some are used for almost every photo; others only occasionally to add very particular effects.

In one "how to" YouTube video from 2014, a young Russian female creator of sophisticated design photos says to her audience: "Find your filters." Her message: Find your own style and use it systematically. Create your own distinct visual identity. Experiment and find your own visual voice. Even though two years later, in 2016, the

use of a single filter apparently is not enough, the logic of her message remains equally relevant.

And that is what hundreds of thousands and perhaps even millions of other Instagram creators are doing: learning from each other and from today's highly designed visual environment and exploring the unique characteristics of the Instagram medium. Their designed images and narratives are their unique art and also *life form*. They use the Instagram medium to find people like themselves, to share their images, feelings and thoughts with global audiences who like what they like, to form groups based on common Instagram patterns (as other bloggers do), to plan trips with them, to support each other in difficult times, to share discoveries, and to define themselves.

The fact that they may be copying styles and strategies from other Instagram users, fashion collections, design sites, magazines, and other sources where modern design and hip sensibilities can be observed, does not make them any less *authentic* or less *real*. For them, what is real is *what they feel, their emotions, and their aesthetic preferences that generate a sense of coherence and self.*

Do We Need to "Liberate" Instagram Authors?

Originally a platform aimed at "normal" people rather than professional photographers or companies, Instagram's own popularity transformed it as it grew from 100 million monthly active users in February 2013 to 500,000 million in February 2015 (Instagram, 2016). Facebook bought Instagram in April 2012. The company started to add new features to help businesses use the platform for marketing and advertising. Other

features helped individuals integrate their Instagram posts with their other social networks, which made these posts more valuable as promotion tools.

In June 2013, Instagram added the ability to connect Instagram accounts to Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr (Wikipedia, 2016b). In November of the same year, the company enabled advertising via a new *sponsored post* type (Protalinski, 2013). The first company to use this was fashion-design brand Michael Kors.

A number of important features for business accounts were announced in May 2016. They include analytics and "the ability to turn Instagram posts into ads directly from the Instagram app itself" (Perez, 2016). The analytics feature called Insights show "top posts, reach, impressions and engagement around posts, along with data on followers like their gender, age and location." According to Instagram, by that time it already had 200,000 advertisers, and these features were designed to allow business users to understand their current and prospective customers, reach more people, and refine their profiles (Perez, 2016).

Many Instagram posts that promote products and brands emulate more personal Instagram aesthetics and their "being in the scene" pathos. The article "Master the 4 Types of Product Instagrams" (Waldron, 2015) describes how to photograph products using these four styles: the *flat lay*, the *minimalist* ("showcase a product in a natural setting" but without a distracting background), *the first person,* and *the scene.* The descriptions of the last two types are very revealing:

The First Person. Give viewers a sense of being in the moment, by taking photos from a first person angle. It helps promote aspirational dreams relating to the product. Hold the camera in a spot that would resemble what someone would be seeing themselves. Centering the product is a good way to keep it feeling personal and clean.

The Scene. Shoot the product with beautiful scenery and even a storyline in the description for viewers to envision themselves partaking in. It gives life behind the product. (Waldron, 2015)

The difference between pre-Instagram advertising photography and these Instagram photo types is that in the former, products or models are presented from the outside, as though looking at a shop window. But in the case of Instagram, products appear as part the author's life. So, if people already identify with the author's lifestyle and aesthetics, they may also identify with the products presented in this way.

However, as already noted, the same "product styles" are also used by Instagram authors for non-commercial purposes: to present their favourite objects and latest fashion purchases or include themselves in the photographed scene. Does every photo showing a hand holding a pretty cappuccino cup promote it? Of course not. But does it contribute to establishing or maintaining the author's personal "brand," even if this author never sells or promotes anything? Of course, yes. And where does the type of photo that shows a close-up of an object or a part of it, thus "fetishizing" it, come from? This photo type first appeared in advertising around 1908–1913.

Are Instagram authors who brand themselves through the use of consistent aesthetics and who practice "product styles" trapped in "ideology" (Marx, *German Ideology*, 1845) and "spectacle" (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 1967)? Is Instagram's self-*branded self* always a *false self*? Do we need to "liberate" these authors?

In my view, "trapped" Instagram authors are those who post photos with what I have called professional aesthetics. They aspire to or already enjoy their "normal" bourgeois life without questioning the world as presented to them in advertising and in "news." Their *good photos* express this sense of *conformity*, the desire to be like everybody else, i.e. to *follow the dominant social and cultural norms*. I am using terms like "dominant" and "mainstream" to refer to behaviours, tastes, and values that are held and practiced by a significantly larger number of people than those taking alternative approaches. This may make these values appear *natural* and *right*.

I see many *designed* photos and Instagramism aesthetics as expressions of a *liberated* consciousness that is critical of the global middle class reality. (Note that the middle class grew substantially around the world after the 1990s, reaching 784 million in 2011 according to a recent analysis, with most growth taking place in Asia.)[9] Instagramism finds meaning in refined sensibility rather than blind conformity. It can mix and match elements from diverse *style and lifestyle* worlds without the fear of "losing yourself."

In this interpretation, the authors of many designed photos carry on the original vision of Instagram from 2010. In this vision, "Instagram" was constructed via a set of differences that contrasted with "normal" *good photography.* They include a square format and filters that not only beautify photos but can also introduce artefacts, erase

details, and add irregular lightness and colour gradients that subvert the perfect photo realism of the lens. At the time *normal photography* meant the 3×4 image ratio inherited from 35 mm film cameras, having everything in focus, and also showing deep perspectival space in landscapes, cityscapes, and group portraits. These norms were common in both professional and casual photography.

The pervasiveness of these norms in advertising, editorial, and corporate photography spread a message of *enslavement* to the word *as it exists now*, to *the safe,* and to *common sense*. By contrast, designed and more abstract photos communicate, in my view, a different message: *having a distance*, being conscious of how social reality is constructed, and being aware of the conventions, norms, and signs of the global middle class ideal of our time.

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 Instagram hipsters *do not resist* the mainstream; they *co-exist* with *it* and are not afraid to borrow its elements or show how much they enjoy commercial products and their favourite brands.

Instagramism is not about binary differences from the mainstream. It is about the selection and combination of particular elements drawn from different contemporary and historical universes, including commercial offerings.[10].

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 late 1990s.

Does the Instagram hip generation fit into this model? In my view, *Instagrammers are neither an avant-garde creating something entirely new, nor subcultures that define themselves in opposition to the mainstream,* nor 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.[11]. (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 represents 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 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 & 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 & Lower East Side, Seoul's Garosu-gil, and the Harajuku area in Tokyo. You hardly see any colour besides black in New York; in Seoul, a white/grey/black palette is the norm; in Harajuku, it is combinations of complementary (warm and cold) bright saturated colours 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 focused 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.

I hope my analysis has demonstrated that Instagram today offers a great platform for studying not only contemporary global photography, but also contemporary global cultural evolution and dynamics in general. As the medium of choice for the "mobile" class of young people today in dozens of countries, it provides insights into their lifestyles, imagination, and the mechanisms of existence, meaning creation, and sociality.

References

Brodmerkel, S., & Carah, N. (2016). *Brand Machines, Sensory Media and Calculative Culture.* London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Bennett, A. (1999) Subcultures or neo-tribes? Rethinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste. *Sociology* Vol. 33 No. 3 August 1999: 599–617.

Dana. (2015, January 25). Reimaging Your Instagram Profile. Retrieved from http://www.thewonderforest.com/2015/01/reimagining-your-instagram-profile.html

Debord, G. (1994) [1967] The Society of the Spectacle. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books.

Denisova, A., & Cairns, P. (2015). First Person vs. Third Person Perspective in Digital Games: Do Player Preferences Affect Immersion? *Human Factors in Computing Systems: Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference,* 145-148. Retrieved from https://wwwusers.cs.york.ac.uk/~pcairns/papers/Denisova_CHI2015.pdf

Drucker, P. (1959). *The Landmarks of Tomorrow.* New York: Harper and Row.

Google. (2016, November 22). Search results. Retrieved from http://www.google.com/?gws_rd=cr&ei=h78zWPPgDMvbvATu9ImADQ#neww indow=1& q=%22Instagram+aesthetic%22

Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* London: Methuen.

Hochman, N., & Manovich, L. (2013). Zooming into an Instagram City: Reading the Local through Social Media. *First Monday*, July. Retrieved from
http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4711/3698

Instagram. (2016, June 21). Instagram Today: 500 Million Windows to the World. Retrieved from http://blog.instagram.com/post/146255204757/160621-news

Jezer, M. (1982). *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States 1945–1960*. Boston: South End Press.

Kochnar, R. (2015, July 15). A Global Middle Class is More a Promise than a Reality. Retrieved from http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/07/08/a-global-middle-class-is-more-promise-thanreality/

MacKay, J. (2015, November 5). The Psychology of Simple. Retrieved from https://crew.co/blog/the-psychology-of-simple

Maffesoli, Michel. (1996 [1988]). *The Time of the Tribes – The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, trans. Don Smith, USA: Sage Publications.

Manovich, L. (2013). *Software Takes Command*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Manovich, L. (2016-). *Instagram and Contemporary Image.* Retrieved from http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image

Moss, C. 'Why don't young people want to be part of a tribe any more?', *Telegraph* (UK), 26 May 2015. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/fashion-and-style/11624401/Why-dont-youngpeople-want-to-be-part-of-a-tribe-any-more.html

Nadine. (2015, April 8). How to Establish Your Instagram Aesthetic. Retrieved from http://blogbrighter.com/establish-your-instagram-aesthetic/

Perez, S. (2016, May 31). Instagram officially announces its new business tools. Retrieved from https://techcrunch.com/2016/05/31/instagram-officially-announces-its-new-businesstools/

Pezzini, M. (2012). An Emerging Middle Class. *OECD 2012 Yearbook*. Retrieved from http://oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/3681/An_emerging_middle_class.html Protalinski, E. (2013, October 3). Instagram confirms 'occasional' in-feed image and video ads are coming to the US in the next couple of months. Retrieved from http://thenextweb.com/facebook/2013/10/03/instagram-confirms-occasional-in-feedads-are-coming-to-the-us-in-the-next-couple-months/

Schreiber, T. (2016). 22 Awesome Websites with Stunning Free Stock Images. *Shopify.com.* Retrieved from https://www.shopify.com/blog/17156388-22-awesome-websites-withstunning-free-stock-images

Tifentale, A. (2017, April). Rules of the Photographers' Universe. *Photoresearcher, Photoresearcher* 27.

Tifentale, A., & Manovich, L. (2016). Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self. In J. Ruchatz, S. Wirth, & J. Eckel (Eds.), *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Analytical, and Theoretical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*. Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming. Retrieved from

http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/competitive-photography-andthe-presentation-of-the-self

Waldron, Z. (2015, August 13). Master the 4 Types of Product Instagrams. Retrieved from https://hellosociety.com/blog/master-the-4-types-of-product-instagrams/

Wikipedia. (2016a). Hipster. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hipster_(1940s_subculture)

Wikipedia. (2016b). Instagram. Features and Tools. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instagram#Features_and_tools

Willett, M. (2015). 'Everyone's obsessed with 'knolling' their stuff and putting the photos on Instagram', businessinsider.com, May 14, 2015. http://www.businessinsider.com/instagram-flat-lay-trend-knolling-2015-5

YouTube. (2016, November 22). Search results. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=instagram+aesthetic+feed

[1] An earlier version of this text has been published as 'Designing and Living Instagram Photography: Themes, Feeds, Sequences, Branding, Faces, Bodies,' as the 4th part of my book *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2016). The book parts are published online under a Creative Commons license as they are completed: 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).

[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 seventeen global cities in 2012–2016, 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 other periods outside of 2012–2016.

[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 artefacts, authors, genres, styles and aesthetic systems can be also 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 artefacts.

[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] The figure of 784 million for the number of members of the global middle class in 2011comes from Kochnar (2015). A much higher figure of 1.8 billion is reported in Pezzini (2012). One thing economists do agree on is that the size of the global middle class grew substantially over this period. Kochnar, for example, claims that it grew from 399 million to 784 million between 2001 and 2011, reaching 200 million in China alone.

[10] 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

[11] See Bennett, 1999 for an overview of the concepts of "subculture" and "tribe" in the sociology of culture.