Navigating styles: a critical recension of Instagram and contemporary image by Lev Manovich

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Navegando estilos: uma recensão crítica sobre o Instagram e a imagem contemporânea por Lev Manovich

Introduction

The author Lev Manovich is a Russian academic and digital culture thinker, well known in the digital arts and culture since the publication of his book *The language of new media* (2001) in which he develops an original approach to reflect on how new media and technology is intersecting different aspects of contemporary culture, drawing parallelisms with the developing of cinema in the 20th century, aesthetics and the translation to a numerical world, enunciating a systematic and rigorous approach to understanding new media.

His latest book *Instagram and contemporary image* recently published in 2017 offers an in deep analysis of the dynamics of users, digital photography, the production of images and ultimately meaning involved in Instagram as todays biggest and widely social media platform to share images and using his own research methods developed with the years, he displays an analysis of more that 15 million photos from 16 global cities that took five years to compile, he uses big data, quantitative research and other qualitative tools such as observational studies to develop the chapters. This book has four parts that covers the collection and interpretation of data (2012-2015) and two years of annotations about observations of those images in which he proposes the importance of analysis by seeing Instagram as place to look into identities "connected by common social medial platforms, cultural sensibilities, and visual aesthetics" (Manovich, 2017, p. 4).

Manovich in his photo analysis discovers a reiteration in the subjects, framing, color palette and more patterns that creates parallels with the developing of photography as a visual language, art form, an everyday artifact and device across the 20th century. He explains how these technological changes in cameras and social platforms are empowering a new vision of encounters by understanding photography and photographers, he coins the term "*Instagramism*" to explain originality, digital subcultures that arises within and contemporary narratives though image in this social platform.

As we navigate a new city or experience in the real world we want to share it as fast as it happens, our image is one of a million others produced and stored in the database, sometimes even at the same time as in a sports event. The social platform helps

us navigate providing us new cartographies by color and photography filters, hashtags, GPS location and redundancy. The new image of tourism helps us navigate these shared experiences built for others but lived by (other) millions.

Some of the arguments that challenges these visions are around reiteration and emptiness from accelerated production of images invade the contemporary life. Authors as Flusser (1983), Virilio (1995) and Martins (2002) anticipates the void in society by the unexpected future that can occur by the mobilization of meaning, surveillance, desire and politics. Our relationship with the present moment is changing. A constant look on these ideas conforms a by the end a landscape to understand the term *Instagramism* in a wider sense to argue possible new territories where the expanded image constantly published on Instagram is used as a tool to navigate physical and virtual spaces, creates classes for content creators, and cope with new narratives.

NEW MEDIA VISIONS IN APPLIED METHODOLOGIES: VIEWS ON THE TRANSCODING OF IMAGE AND STYLE

To put into context the analysis of Instagram and contemporary expanded photography it is important to review the principles from which the author stablished some perspectives regarding new media, and how those concepts are related and used in the studies of esthetics, art and technology, cyberculture and communication. In his book *The language of new media* (Manovich, 2001) the author establish that contemporary new media has five characteristics: i) numerical representation, any object can be coded to a numerical representation, those mathematical representations can be manipulated and programmed, the materiality are numbers and arithmetical expressions, in other words: malleable code. ii) Modularity, a characteristic in which the construction and relationships of objects are understandable within systems and iterations to create new ones in layers of layers, small portions of code to build a big program or an image that use pixels to create a bigger image, we can threat or use a small portion of code or pixels independent of the large program or image.

Then he describes iii) automation a characteristic of repeating complex instructions, procedures or modifications "human intentionality can be removed from the creative process at least in part" (Manovich, 2001, p. 32). He exposes iv) variability in which a new media object can change to potential infinite possibilities, and finally v) transcoding, an idea of how culture change over time the ways of shaping and understanding how to code reality. As audio capture evolved from wax cylinders, to vinyl, cassettes, CD's, mp3 and now cloud streaming. Culture and technology is constantly transcoding reality.

Instagram as new media covers a wide range of other uses tangential to the production of images. Instagram is also a camera, a private and public photo album, media (as source of information) and medium of expression and construction for the individual self and as part of a community, it is: a total machine of meaning as the finality of content production is itself in various dimensions, an *autotelic* system (Martins, 2011) due the interactions beyond the image as a surface. The transcode characteristics for example, are

more than a moment or place, this new media platform enhances the *transcodification* of a social experience beyond the photo. But it is only allowed by the modular characteristic of the photography, and possibilities of software, GPG and screens to name a few.

Under this scope it is coherent that the logic used to analyze Instagram is built upon frameworks that are in consonance with this spirit. The author formed an inter-disciplinary team of artist, coders, sociologist, anthropologist and engineers to enhance the analysis. They coined his methodology as *"big cultural data"* (Manovich, 2017, p. 4). Big data analysis is on the trend in Humanities research since we started to create more information per second that we can analyze at once, we need: numbers to understand numbers faster, so the author refers to his big data approach of interpretation as some sort of digital ethnography, using digital tools to understand image in digital culture. They analyzed 15.000.000 images in the course of 2010 – 2015 over 16 cities using big data, combined with direct observation in mobile phone photography from 2010 – 2015 in 58 cities located in 38 countries. The strategy for building the present research thus was a mix methodology with qualitative approaches and quantitative views from sociology, art history and aesthetics.

As of 2012 it was estimated that Instagram had 30 million users, by 2014 the number increased to 300 million and today it is estimated around 800 million, this numbers comes with expansion of networks, price and access to mobile phones, desires and cultural recategorizations. Since its inception the app has maintained a state of the art in cultural trends evolving over in time adopting many features to expand the storytelling capabilities within the community. So, the methodology used has to be thought out to adapt for future changes and new implementations. The author resume into two statements these integration of methodologies to research new media:

> 1) generate hypotheses that can be later verified, refined or rejected by quantitative computational analysis.

> 2) discover, describe and interpret patterns that can be hard or impossible to study and verify or dispute quantitatively given limitations of the computational methods or available data. (Manovich, 2017, p. 22)

With the big data and analysis in multiple dimensions such as hierarchy of information, repetition of subjects, patterns in cities, months or regions, links to usage of the tool to retouch the color palette, the most used filters, and social data: interaction with likes or comments and how a photo is part of the sequence of the user feed. This mixed methodology is used to understand better the meaning behind the production of those images, being the latter a creative human force beyond machine learning. Cultural interactions are such an important part of social semiotics today because numbers can't cover all aspects of culture, thoughts, categories or community interaction can't be done by machines with artificial intelligence, however they can be used to discover insights from them.

Definition of photo types used in the book

Analyzing millions of photos from regular occasional users, locals, tourists, photographers, celebrities and influencers the data collecting gave a wide perspective to see patterns in how the images are displayed and constructed over the medium. Three types of photos are described in the book: *Casual*, *Professional* and *Designed* photos.

Manovich's style of Instagram photos and general characteristics

Casual photos	Casual, accidental, unexpected, not planned. Emphasis on the moment to share with close acquaintances. Kodak moment.
Professional photos	Following principles of good photography (composition, technique, etc.)
Designed photos – Instagramism –	Design an environment. Artificial - perfect. Filters, intensifies reality. Characteristics of graphic design – a mixed media language not entirely photographic. Icons. Less information. Stereotypes.

Table 1: Lev Manovich categorization of Instagram photographic styles
in his book *Instagram and contemporary image* (2017)

The *casual photo* in Instagram is described with the antecedent of the concept of *home mode*, a concept developed by Chalfen in 1987 in his book *Snapshot version of life.* He uses the now widely accepted term of the *Kodak culture*. When traditional subjects appear in situations as birthdays, celebrations, family holidays, etc., to be latter shared within the same intimate circle. In this kind of image, the people that usually appears are friends or family, we somehow know the people on the images and the photo is to network with them (Manovich, 2017, p. 41). In Instagram those subjects are expanded with food, selfies, travels, and so the intimate circle, from traditional categories (family and friends) new ones expands with close acquaintances, members of a community, sub cultures, linked by a mutual interest in sharing pictures with them in the spirit of home mode: sharing a moment more than a photograph from just an aesthetic or technical point of view.

The author presents quantitative data to support those statements, crossing data from cities and users he concludes that casual photos are not purposely created to get more followers or likes, there are not an intention of aesthetics as much as the intention to create meaningful and newsworthy content to people that the photographer care to share. For the next two photo styles, sharing pictures has a competitive vision. The term "competitive photography" was introduced by Alise Tifendale in 2016 for photos competing for likes, comments, followers and engagement. Manovich call these styles *professional* and *designed* photos. Broadly the particularities of professional photos are aesthetic and technical quality of the images, while designed photos are associated with

lifestyles and building a personal brand with elements beyond the camera to attend trends, "coolness" or other contemporary ways of belonging into a group.

Casual photos, the esthetics of sharing an instant

Casual photos have embedded the spirit behind the brand name *Instagram* as it evocates us on the instant, concept of sharing *as fast* with close acquaintances as we can. This theme is developed reviewing the esthetics behind those images by observing large groups of users trying to pursuit a certain look: an accidental feel. The tool and the community are helping creators to enhance that effect in casual photos as the social interest is to document the instant and do not pay attention on concepts as composition, exposure, aperture, etc., however the author sums some toughs on how Instagram improves visual literacy, hence, users can distinguish how genuine is a picture taken under these circumstances.

This visual literacy comes from users looking and following other accounts that use the same interface, camera, tools and filters, easing complex operations. New media development is focusing on learning by using teaching us in an invisible way how to compose or retouch a photography by constantly referring to examples from others. We learn by observing and taking action with the same tool. Accidental photos are not accidents anymore, as casual photos are often copies of an already working formula to mark a moment or instant, the *selfie* is quite an example of these dynamics. A stablished way of documenting everyday experiences with a defined set of rules like esthetics.

In the data analysis, the reiteration of the subjects is not stable and change with season, city and fashion trends, but in general are dominated by the human world. Frequency on subjects are by hashtags: *smile, me, family, fashion, friends, selfie*. These findings somehow corroborate the concept of home mode, as the pictures becomes personal with a documentary mood to intimate circles, domains of human emotions and representations becomes coherent. Sharing photos have become part of documenting experiences but as personal or individual this might seem, the possibilities for innovation and creation in this style it's not common. A photo in front of the Eiffel tower for example has more value for the experience lived than the aesthetic of the product, the surface is merely a coincidence of other factors.

Flusser wrote on the possibilities of creating new images are not upon photographers but the camera itself. Stating that the program inside the cameras has a limited number of photos, by default: the camera limits the potential of the photographer (Flusser, 1983, p. 39). In the case of Instagram, the camera is the app itself, by having the same platform and optical machine, the experience "trip", "tourism" or "*foodie*" also has evolved to a homogenic aesthetic. The narrative elements to communicate and document new experiences such as trips are not complete without selfies, curious food or a funny sign, because millions of others have constructed the trip with the same resources available.

Professional photos, standardizing good photography by conventions

The second category described by the author is the *professional* photo, focusing not only for images produced by people that had studies in arts or photography or whom made a living out of pictures, he uses the term to classify pictures that follow the craft of photography that follows rules "codified in books during the second part of the XX century" (Manovich, 2017, p. 58), todays is taught in tutorials, magazines, schools, etc. Those rules certainly got stablished with the boom of color film photography and technology in post war times: composition, exposure, visual lines, order and hierarchy of planes or subjects to name a few, are common rules to any photographer, videographer, designer or artist today. Breaking those rules requires a deep understanding of them.

However, many of those rules are integrated within the actual digital camera, *automating* technical and aesthetical aspects that use to require a lot of training and know-how to accomplish. That's why even nonprofessionals can take pictures with these characteristics. In the study they found that using some rules doesn't guarantee good photography, the key to identify on this style is to use rules in a "systematic way" so if a picture stands with a systematic usage of rules regardless if the author is conscious of the process or not, or even just imitating others the photo will be classified as *professional*.

In the analysis on reiteration of subjects, it is claimed that landscapes, cityscapes, persons against exotic or activity related backgrounds and extreme closeups showing intricate details are the most frequent. The research concludes in an "appealing with concreteness" (Manovich, 2017, p. 61) within this style. As the foreground and backgrounds are related with outdoors, nature or cities, it is about occupying those spaces. *Concreteness* intends to portrayal the beauty of reality[1]. All this is intensified by the current quality of sensors, screens and cameras that reproduce an image in extremely high definition, depicting a landscape or city in all of its glory, trying to be more real and perfect than being there.

Designed photos and *Instagramism*

The third type of photos are the *designed* photos, images that expose predominantly some stylized looks. Elements such as symmetry or asymmetry, breaking the depth of perspective to flatten the image, heavy cropping and heavy tonal variations using various apps and software sequences to colorize into a flat finish, are some of the relevant characteristics. As in professional photos we see landscapes that show shapes and curves in an organic way, in designed photos the elements are arranged and composed to be strict and geometrical, even the environment is set (or constructed) in a way that regardless its organic nature it becomes geometrical and grid-like, a characteristic opposed to a naturalistic way of portrait nature, the city or everyday life.

Instagram also has a narrative as a timeline, the sequence is a factor to understand this style. The parameters to construct these images define the personal style of the authors, almost in a sense of personal branding. The timeline narrative forces the users to

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[1] Also implied with the extreme close ups type of picture. Gazing in territories that the eye cannot reach.

keep a consistent production managing a style, subjects, geometry or filters. Variations in this style are minimal, but at some point, sub patterns start to emerge that are linked to elements of cultural identity and belonging, developed with small variations and differences. Usually users are self-described as travelers, bloggers, influencers or any tag to mark an "Instagram class". The style is more similar as a filter effect on reality: be part of a lifestyle. Any situation can have an *Instagramism* look, any subject can be *Instagramized:*

> it is about "contemplation", "meditation", "being lazy", and so on – the luxury of doing absolutely nothing while being in a perfect place, perfectly dressed, with a perfect drink, solo or with a perfect friend, when you look a very particular landscape or cityscape. (...) they are about reducing greyscale and color contrasts – which are metaphors for emotional contrast and cognitive dissonance. (Manovich, 2017, p. 95)

Navigating Instagram

By the end the book *Instagram and contemporary culture* develops concepts on new cultural capitals, photography and communication literacy works and data about usage and time spent by users and cities, information to corroborate the arguments over styles and future research on the field. Below are reflections to further expand dimensions in socio semiotics, critique and visual studies. First, thoughts on speed, experience and content creation in controlled environments, then arguments on tools to navigate the noise and redundancy, and finally ideas on meaning and narratives of experiences.

Pictures are published at a frantic pace, assorting an abundance of information. The influence on speed in every part of the usage of Instagram; from learning photography fast to start producing and sharing faster in order to get more feedback and repeat the cycle, mechanize our approach to navigate and express ourselves,

> digital optics is indeed a rational metaphor for intoxication, statistical intoxication, that is: a blurring of perception that affects the real as much as the figurative, as though our society were sinking into the darkness of a voluntary blindness. (Virilio, 1994, p. 76)

The camera and the system offer a controlled environment to produce and share pictures, the world is masked by numerical representations and the risk of keep producing repetitive non-valuable content erase what we use to know as genuine experiences by the anguish to publish and to be seen: "*artificial reality* involving digital simulation that would oppose the 'natural reality' of classical experience" (Virilio, 1994, p. 76).

Between professional and designed photos occurs a similar phenomenon: the picture is created to engage users towards likes, comments and social interaction thought the platform by creating a *pleasing aesthetic.* This causes an almost infinite reiteration of pictures, we can easily get lost in the abundance and volume: millions of pictures every second. Actual technology exacerbates artificially our desires, causing communication to

be a journey through noise, framing noise as "the information of others" (Martins, 2002, p. 183), unknown users bonds just by GPS localization, cultural groups, shared interest or aesthetics.

What a style is and can do is more than an aesthetic mean and knowledge, styles can be used as tools to helps us read the information. Pictures had as a surface level but in a more invisible aspect, styles carry data that helps us navigate the noise from others and sometimes our own by aggrupation of subjects, cities, landmarks or important places in a city, food, etc. A printed tourist guide is obsolete. Users of the social network can navigate to a GPS coordinate in a city and have a mapping in real time, also they can discover places or activities (public, private, commercial) navigating the app: Instagram as a touristic map. A guide where a tourist can experience the city as a local "representative function dominates over aesthetic function" (Manovich, 2017, p. 118).

As a counterpart, Instagram is a place where dangerously all becomes the same. The competition for likes and abundance creates detailed maps of the real but also a crisis on originality when even "the intention of the photographer is programmed" (Flusser, 2017, p. 47). We are not living just an ambience of shared esthetic experiences, the experience as an act itself is a shared repetition, as a consequence of the machine and the program. Flusser imply that the camera offers certain limited possibilities to photographers and creation, ending as redundancy.

The big data recovered by Manovich supports that originality and reiteration is the mechanic of the styles. A major critique to the platform is to provide alternatives to the underlying effect to produce and liking similar (things), but not the difference, a true democratic environment:

> what place we take on this world, modeled by technologies that administrate emotions, for the excluded, illiterate, marginalized and disqualified. It´s entirely to solve the politic problem of the configuration of the new democratic space. (Martins, 2002, p. 189)

These political tensions can also decant on class, a theme on which Instagram can also be questionable. We can disqualify users by aesthetic preference, literacy, technological skills, economic access and privilege. The program stimulates the use of Instagram by ranking users and pictures with popularity and status on how they influence others. Instagram classes (Manovich, 2017, p. 119) are consequences of these tensions to generate fresh and relevant content with speed, mechanism of interaction and control.

Virilio in *The art of the motor* elucidates how new classes are conforming due technological changes, he coins the *classes of speed* (Virilio, 1995). Emerging classes on Instagram are influencers, foodies, trend-setters or travelers, users that use the dynamics and social interaction to be relevant with every resource at disposal: be the first, the most liked, commented, reposted, the more consistent, etc. even if their photos are just copies of millions of others, the classes develop a sense of belonging and community. Content is often filtered by those classes, as they can influence communities and trends. The cultural value of photography on social media is expanding with labor and social factors.

The born of a new visual medium influence the stablished traditional ones expanding mutually their languages as studied by Sontag in her work *on photography* (Sontag, 1989). Definitively Instagram and the visual language of the medium is influencing other genres of art and photography, but how much these visual objects are influencing the meaning and construction on contemporary narratives. What does it mean *to travel* today? is a voyage ever complete without a publication in social media of the departure, the passage and the arrival?

Instagram pushes users to think in specific ways to capture society, culture and fluxes, using a linear narrative in how the stories feature and main *newsfeed* is structured, offering multiple overlapping linearities that cross and intersect between the audiences. Images and experiences can be arranged in many ways as some sort of expanded album of fragments. Certain big data analysis establish an exacerbated reiteration of feelings and experiences shared by others. Taking as an example a touristic picture in front of the Eiffel tower, the image is part of the narrative of the trip, more than a memoir of the real experience: the visit is about using the possibility and resources to build a photo. Experience the place as others, share the memoir and event digitally duplicated as any other user. Empathy is more of an ephemeral feature as desire, true connection to peers is mediated by the emptiness that are provided by logics of speed, social interactions and control "lacking of immaterialities in social life" (Martins, 2002, p. 190).

Manovich's book is sometimes leaning towards a positivistic – big data – approach discovering patters as one of the vantages to use numbers to understand a numerical society. But a major critique arises as the statistical approach to understand society sometimes fall short when crafting tools to assist us in understanding contemporary phenomenon considering possibilities for autonomy, self-determination, or freedom. Is it possible to create new style or just use the ones that the established powers (device) or classes (in discourse) approves as valid? Is it possible to create tools to give back meaning in creation and artifacts, enabling creators to construct their own narratives and experiences.

The phenomena of how culture use Instagram is an enormously rich place to look at contemporary debates, these mixed methods conveying ethnography, big data and critique points to creative researching for future studies, leaning towards the *remix* and property on desire and subjectivities with photo styles, new cultural values in touristic places, navigation and narratives, considerations for value, ethics and acceptance in codified realities, social aspirations and classes by new digital categories, gender studies, and new methodologies and theoretical lines in an ever-expanding map. These actual debates could enable a brighter future as contemporary individuals embedding more diversity in tools, readings on phenomena that will prove that more options than the ones available are possible towards a conciliation on real felt experiences and the ones that populates the cyberspace, as Steyerl points emphatically: to rethink our relationships with new bonds with the present (Steyerl, 2014, p. 47).

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