



Photo Filter Apps: Understanding Analogue Nostalgia in the New Media Ecology

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Abstract

As digital media have become more pervasive and entrenched in our daily routines, a nostalgic countertrend has increasingly valued the physical and tactile nature of the analogue image. In the past few years, technologically obsolete devices, such as lo-fi cameras and vinyl records, have not faded out of sight completely but are instead experiencing a comeback. At the same time, digital media capitalise on the nostalgia for the analogue and fetishise the retro aesthetics of old technologies. This article explores the emergence of photo filter and effect applications which allow users to modify digital photos, adding signifiers of age such as washed-out colours, scratches and torn borders. It is argued that these new technologies, with programs such as Instagram, Hipstamatic and Camera 360, bring back the illusory physicality of

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picture-taking through digital skeuomorphism.

Drawing on media archaeology practice, this article interrogates the limits of the retro sensibility and the fetishisation of the past in the context of digital media, in particular by focusing on the case study of the start-up Instagram. This photo filter application neither merely stresses the twilight nature of photography nor represents the straightforward digital evolution of previous analogue features. Rather, it responds to the necessity to feel connected to the past by clear and valued signs of age, mimicking a perceived sense of loss. Faced with the persistent hipster culture and the newness of digital media, photo filter apps create comfortable memories, ageing pictures and adding personal value. As such, it will be argued that this phenomenon of nostalgia for analogue photography can be linked to the concepts of ritual and totem. By providing a critical history of Instagram as a photo-sharing social network, this article aims to explain new directions in the rapidly changing system of connective media.

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