

The Flânerie of Instagram:  
Studying the Photography-Based Social Network as a  
Self-Curated Newspaper within the Modern Cityscape of the Internet

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AH 398

December 16, 2016

## Introduction

Instagram is a hyper-popular audiovisual medium that redefines the place of photography in the modern space. Connected to a growing user-base of millions, Instagram is a large-scale social network that encourages active, constant participation. Professional photographers, videographers, and ‘iPhoneographers’ alike are able to contribute to the growing body of photographic works, with no necessary distinction or difference in experience. What results is a cacophony of different types of works which continuously grows and interacts with itself every day. Beginning as a smartphone-only application, Instagram was from the get-go streamlined for instantaneous, personal contributions which embed themselves in the day-to-day traversals of the users. Frequently the openness and ease of use of the platform means ‘Instagrammers’ use their accounts to share windows into their lives, whether through selfies, shots of their home-cooked meals, comments on other user’s posts, or landscape pictures from where they are living. Ultimately, regardless of an individual’s background in photography or interest in viewing photographic works, Instagram is a hugely popular network, with a validating social experience built to be consumed by all. A dramatic shift in the realm of photography, Instagram constructs a unique and notable new modern photographic experience. In this paper I wish to explore the shape and form of Instagram, and how it articulates themes of modernity through the works of Walter Benjamin. Ultimately, Instagram’s audiovisual social network fundamentally influences and changes the way people use photography, essentially where the Instagrammer becomes a flâneur in a modern cityscape.

In order to illustrate the resemblance between the Instagrammer and Benjamin's concept of the flâneur, I have structured this paper through analysis first, and argument last. First, a comprehensive history of Instagram is needed to understand the basic qualities of the platform, as both as an art historical space as well as an engineered work of corporate consumerism. Over the past six years, the network has been constantly molded by its founders to be more popular and powerful. To gain clarity with Instagram as a medium for photography as well as a social network, this section pulls extensively from notable moments in the development of the product and changes to the company's image over time. Next, the landscape of Instagram will be negotiated with the landscape of newspapers. A central question to this first half of the paper is whether or not being a professional photographer on Instagram, or an everyman Instagram user, changes the interactions and expectations between Instagrammers. Determined through the works of Walter Benjamin and Teju Cole, it becomes clear that the Instagram content which together amalgamates into feeds are analogs for the newspaper, and are intimate works which give rise to a new modern experience. Finally, a comparative study of Benjamin's writings on the flâneur and the above analysis of Instagram will yield a revelatory angle through which to study Instagram as a modern audiovisual cityscape. The ideal Instagrammer is both a photographer and a consumer, inculcated by both the design of the Instagram system itself and the experiences of the modern individual in the crowded 21st century space.

## **A Brief History of Instagram**

Instagram was launched on October 6, 2010 by founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, and within a month gained one million users. Initially the social network was rather restrictive, perhaps even niche; users could only post square-format images, and the app was built with a clear focus on “filters” that adjusted elements of the image, such as adding a color tint or applying a vignette after the photo was taken. Inspired by Polaroid cameras, both due to the simple quality of the square photos as well as the instant nature of the experience, Systrom and Krieger developed Instagram as a simple way to “change and improve the way the world communicates and shares.” In March 2012, Systrom celebrated Instagram’s growth of thirteen million users in thirteen months, and announced that “we are nearing the end of what Philip Gourevitch of the *New Yorker* called ‘the decade in which the world went camera-mad... the decade where everything is depicted, and every picture must be shared.’”<sup>1</sup> Rather than distance Instagram from this concept of “camera-madness,” Systrom almost relishes in it. He mentions Gourevitch not to prove him wrong, but to highlight that we are a decade past the initial proliferation of digital cameras and the internet, and now we deserve something better. Instead of condemning those who want to take pictures of everything, Systrom himself said at the SXSW 2012 conference: “my hope is that people feel at home in the long run on Instagram by sharing just about anything.” Systrom’s ideal Instagrammer uses the network as much as possible, without worrying about having an immense amount of followers. Only a tiny percentage of users attain a huge following, and Systrom mentions them as if they are exceptions to the norm, where a small

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Marston, “Instagram’s founders,” *BBC News*, April 10, 2012.

minority of content on Instagram is judged by “performance” where “it’s all about gorgeous photos.”<sup>23</sup>

A month after Systrom’s talk at SXSW 2012, Facebook bought Instagram for one billion dollars. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg declared that “now, we’ll be able to work even more closely with the Instagram team to also offer the best experiences for sharing beautiful mobile photos with people based on your interests.”<sup>4</sup> As a reaction to the massive acquisition, Paul Ford of the New York Magazine wrote that Instagram virtually “sold out.” Before the buyout, Instagram was run from a tiny office focused on the community experience, where the “user is a sacred being.” Facebook, on the other hand, treats its users like capital, where “you are the product being sold.” Ford’s conclusion was that “Facebook bought the thing that is hardest to fake. It bought sincerity.”<sup>5</sup> By 2013, Instagram had reached one-hundred million users and started to introduce “tagging,” where you could label your friends in photographs akin to

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin Systrom, “Is Our Photo Madness Creating Mediocrity or Magic?” (panel, SXSW 2012, Austin, Texas, March 11, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the authorship for studying Instagram posts as art historical pieces is rapidly growing. A revelatory comparison between traditional museum curation and art analysis with modern sites like Tumblr and Instagram was made in 2014 by Ben Davis in his article, “Ways of Seeing Instagram.” In this work, Davis describes the power of Instagram to be both undelimited by the constraints of traditional art viewership, as well as increasingly prone to art-like contributions (or at least contributions that can be startlingly compared to previous works in the canon of art history).

Ben Davis, “Ways of Seeing Instagram,” *Artnet News*, June 24, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn M. Rusli, “Facebook Buys Instagram for \$1 Billion,” *New York Times Dealbook*, April 9, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ford, “Facebook and Instagram: When Your Favorite App Sells Out,” *New York Magazine*, April 10, 2012.

Facebook's tagging, as well as video sharing and direct messaging, where users can individually message each other content. This same year the company changed its catchy biography on the social media site Twitter from "a fast, beautiful, and fun way to share your photos with friends and family" to "capturing and sharing the world's moments."<sup>6</sup> The year after, Instagram also implemented sponsored photos and videos from advertisers, who can use the platform to target user interests and tastes to market products from a personal angle. In 2015 and 2016, Instagram added a few more features, allowing users to upload photos in any size instead of just square, videos up to sixty seconds in length, rather than just fifteen, and "Instagram Stories" that are temporary compilations of photos and videos that disappear after twenty-four hours. For Instagram, these stories motivate users to post more content without worrying about "overposting... throughout the day—with as much creativity as you want."<sup>7</sup>

With this dense history of Instagram in mind, a few assumptions can be derived about the form and purpose of the network. First of all, Instagram is a social network. Photography was the chosen medium through which System and Krieger developed a model for communication. Instagram, thus, is not a platform explicitly for artwork, or even for 'photography' as it may be understood in art historical terms. Instagram is a platform for communicating between individuals who express themselves and literally capture themselves through constant interactions with other users and their own feed. Second of all, although Instagram was first developed as a homage to and evolution of the Polaroid, it gained success through real-time social interactions. Over time, the

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<sup>6</sup> Eli Langer, "Instagram Video Taking a Swing at Vine: Study," *CNBC*, June 23, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Instagram, "Introducing Instagram Stories," *Instagram Blog*, August 2, 2016.

constraints that defined how Instagram content would look melted away, with the instant validation and circulation of content being at top priority. It is a social network that uses audiovisual works to create windows into the user's day-to-day lives, effectively "capturing and sharing the world's moments." Even if some users gain large followings based on the quality of their posts, Systrom claims this is a minority, not the expected use case. Lastly, Instagram is a company that, similar to Facebook, sees the "user as product." Instagram is a modern consumer space, not an individualized artistic-creative space (even if it may have started as such), and it cannot be separated from the moves of capital and marketing that have since earned the company billions of dollars.<sup>8</sup>

### **Instagram as an Analog to the Newspaper**

Studying an individual Instagram post may seem remarkably similar to studying an individual work of photography or video. It would be inaccurate, however, to call Instagram a platform for artworks. Rather, Instagram is a network constructed in the modern space, similar to the newspaper, where the relationship between the consumer and producer is of central importance to the existence of the medium itself. Walter Benjamin wrote in *The Author as Producer* that "nothing binds the reader to his newspaper so much as... impatience, which demands fresh nourishment every day." In this way, the reader is already the writer, as it is he who "describes or prescribes" the content that is published each issue.<sup>9</sup> This is an analog to the experience of an

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<sup>8</sup>Leena Rao, "Instagram More Than Doubles Advertiser Base in Six Months," *Fortune Magazine*, September 22, 2016.

<sup>9</sup>Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Understanding Brecht* (Thetford: Thetford Press Limited, 1985), 89.

iPhoneographer who uses Instagram habitually to circulate his works and view other works (as the founders have planned for). That is not to say that users of Instagram cannot use the platform to host photographic content. However, there is a stark difference between the vast majority of content on the platform (and that which it was designed for), and the outliers.

Although each image posted to Instagram can be viewed in isolation, the essential experience of Instagram finds its locus in the ‘feed’ of audiovisual material. Viewing Instagram content is primarily done through a continuous aggregation of posts made available in a few different forms. The first and most prevalent form is the Instagram homepage, where all content from users you are following is pulled together in chronological order. In addition to this format, users can dive into user-by-user feeds that only sort a single account’s material, hashtag-by-hashtag feeds that are amalgams of multiple user content sorted by user-denoted terms preceded by the ‘#’ symbol, and broad based ‘Explore’ sections that pick apart current events or trends that are showcased by the Instagram company. What results is a form of viewing photographic content not dissimilar from Benjamin’s newspaper example; advertisers and editorialists fill the pages of both mediums at rapid pace, creating content because they know it will be consumed and “desired” by the reader. Ultimately this serves to bring Instagram farther away from the realm of art, and pushes it into the realm of the newspaper, where “the conventional separation... between author and reader” is melted down and destroyed in the modern moment, not to mention capitalized by commerce.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Understanding Brecht* (Thetford: Thetford Press Limited, 1985), 90.



Even if Instagram was built for everyday, consumer-driven use akin to a newspaper, it is still valuable to study those who find legitimate photographic value through the “visual demotic,” as art historian Teju Cole writes in *The New York Times Magazine*. Cole highlights several well-known photographers who use the platform as a “space for new creative work,” in essence, a new artistic experience as defined by the social relationships established in the network of Instagram. Thus, even though hardworking professional artists are the minority of Instagram’s user-base, even they prize the network for its ability to reach individuals on a continuous and unfettered basis. Just as Benjamin wrote about the newspaper reader, the Instagram viewer is likewise the principal driver of new content, their desires and motivations creating the space that artists end up finding valuable through Instagram’s social feedback. As Cole concludes his article, he admits that Instagram’s unique power comes from the “directness,” the relationship users have with the content-producers, and how this creates a “conversation that unfolds gradually, over weeks and months.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Instagrammer as Flâneur**

If the Instagram feed is comparable to the newspaper, the Instagrammer who explores and inevitably gets lost in the giant social network is comparable to the flâneur. Before we can understand a contemporary, 21st century interpretation of the flâneur, a careful analysis of Charles Baudelaire and Benjamin’s flâneur is necessary to elucidate the essential qualities and context that describes the flânerie space.

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<sup>11</sup> Teju Cole, “Serious Play,” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 9, 2015.

Walter Benjamin describes the concept of the flâneur in depth in his relevantly named work, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyrical Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. In this volume, Benjamin writes that “the arcades [of Paris] were a cross between a street and an *intérieur*,” where the street becomes a “dwelling” place for the flâneur, a home as much as his own. Although adorned with “shiny, enamelled signs of businesses” and encrusted with the wealth of capitalism, the bourgeois flâneur is unfazed by the pressures of the workingman that bustles all about him.<sup>12</sup> And yet, why does the flâneur choose the streets of the city over his own house? Benjamin posits that this is because “the flâneur only seems to break through... the hollowing space created in him by... isolation with the borrowed... isolation of strangers.” And so the space of the flâneur is at the same time interiorized and exterior, one that the leisurely bourgeois navigates in a nonchalant protest against the alienating crowds and working life of modernity. In the cityscapes like those which Benjamin considers, crowds are socially abstract, yet entirely grounded in “isolated private interests.”<sup>13</sup> Without the pressures and unfreedom that comes from the overflowing urbanite masses in the capitalist world, the flâneur does not exist; he is both an intrinsic component of the masses and yet he is at the same time detached from it; the flâneur determines and builds the city around him through his interactions and observations of the space around him, as much responsible for the capitalist demands as he is a recipient to them.

Using the lens of the flâneur to interpret Instagram is merely a technique in textual analysis. Benjamin himself considered the “city as text,” and in the same way, we

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Flâneur,” in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyrical Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1997), 35-38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 58-62.

can consider Instagram and the sphere of the internet as a “architectural and human interactional frame” which after methodological analysis can be comprehended as a social text just a 19th century Paris was. Mike Featherstone, a contemporary sociologist, when considering the concept of a contemporary flâneur wrote that “in effect, the Internet will become a data city” where inhabitants will have the potential to “develop their own aesthetic... in cyberspace” which in turn would bring about immersion and intimacy that is comparable to that which the Parisian bourgeois experienced in Benjamin’s writings. And, just as the city evolves as new avenues and arcades are constructed, the internet deepens, growing in complexity as it is constantly torn down and rebuilt with new websites, content, and commerce centers. It would make sense that the internet has the capacity to subsume the role of the walkable city, in addition, because it does not have to grapple with physical elements which in Paris led to the decline of the flâneur: there is no worry of dangerous traffic, or even the consequences of violence and voyeurs.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the internet, and in this case, Instagram, creates a cityscape without moral or physical deterrent, which is widely accessible to the modern consumer. This consumer then strolls through the corridors of Instagram’s feeds and accounts, leisurely passing by most content, but at the same time being the chief reason why that content is circulated in the first place. An Instagrammer is subjected to advertisements and endorsements from immensely popular figures (like the White House’s official account, or the often hyperactive accounts of celebrities), and yet remains content in an apparently intimate experience with his or her followers—perhaps because, as a flâneur, an Instagrammer can simply walk past a storefront he or she no

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<sup>14</sup> Mike Featherstone, “The Flâneur, the city and virtual public life,” *Urban Studies* 35, no. 5/6 (May 1998).

longer desires to see, which in turn influences that which those storefronts market, and so on. An Instagrammer is thus a flâneur in the newspaper-like realm of Instagram in the burgeoning multiplicity of cityscapes on the internet.

Teju Cole, who appeared in the previous section explicating the role of the well-composed photographer in the personal tumultuousness of Instagram, contributes to the contemporary authorship of the flâneur. Although Walter Benjamin first popularized this idea drawing from the works of Charles Baudelaire in the 19th century, Cole rekindles the spirit of the flâneur which arguably “fell out of favor” thanks to the “fruits of the Industrial Revolution!” In a thoughtful article entitled “In Praise of the Flâneur,” contributor Bijan Stephen writes, in response to the question “might flânerie be due for a revival?”:

If contemporary literature is any indication, the answer is a soft yes. Take Teju Cole’s debut novel, *Open City*. Cole’s narrator, Julius, wanders up and down Manhattan, across the Atlantic to Brussels and back again, while off-handedly delivering bits of wisdom and historical insight. It’s not just that *Open City* is beautifully written, though that’s certainly true. Cole’s skill manifests itself in depicting the dreamy psychogeographic landscape—and accompanying amorality and solipsism—of Julius’s mind. Riding behind his eyes is a trip; even though we’re in his head, the tone of his thoughts still sets us at a distance.<sup>15</sup>

What Teju Cole captures within his fiction writing is equally captured within the boundaries of Instagram. As viewers via the internet, we are infinitely detached from the actual moment and place being pictured in an Instagram post. The supposed intimacy of the Instagram user-to-user relationship, hand-in-hand with the immediacy of the Instagram feed, which garners its heightened urgency through the collective “impatience” of its following, creates a modern city-like space for the Instagram user to wander.

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<sup>15</sup> Bijan Stephen, “In Praise of the Flâneur,” *The Paris Review*, October 17, 2013.

## Conclusion

The modern space of Instagram is remarkably analogous to the 19th century space of the flâneur. Through a comparative analysis of the past and present conceptions of modernity, of Walter Benjamin and Teju Cole in particular, a significant bank of social and art historical analysis is unlocked. Walter Benjamin's considerations on the flâneur and the commercial axis of the newspaper closely resembles the quasi-intimate world of Instagram, which itself relies predominantly on the everyday passersby to both photograph and interact with the existing audiovisual material on the platform. Over the course of numerous augmentations to the Instagram application over the past six years, founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger developed a crowded commercial space that is permeated by advertisers and editorial content. And yet, these aspects did not detract from the core usability of the platform, as apparently the aesthetic and artistic qualities of Instagram posts are secondary to social navigability. In this way, Instagram has overtly proven itself to be an intentionally crowded space for any modern internet-user (arguably a 21st century bourgeois-like character), who finds delight not in mere validation or consumption of material, but in the total modern experience that depends on feeds and exploration—a never-ending arcade of storefronts. The internet and Instagram itself may be considered a sort of city space, and ultimately these essential feeds are comparable directly to Benjamin's study of newspapers. For the majority of Instagrammers, the content is self-curated, a result of past walkthroughs of the platform, where users have individually selected people and brands to follow. Rather than choosing between a set of different newspapers, the users of Instagram create their own newspaper, a montage of their traversals through the cityscape. And so the ideal

Instagrammer is a flâneur, a result of and a defining trait for the space that surrounds it and the feeds that propagate therein, both intimately and personally connected with the network as if it was their own home, but still immersed in the continuous flow of users and content that craves the user's attention. Instagram has thus successfully built a daunting network of flânerie who themselves feel closely connected and attached to the hustle and bustle about them, who themselves curate newspapers of accessible, interactable content that perpetuates both distance and closeness to the work itself in the 21st century.

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