Photographic Memory

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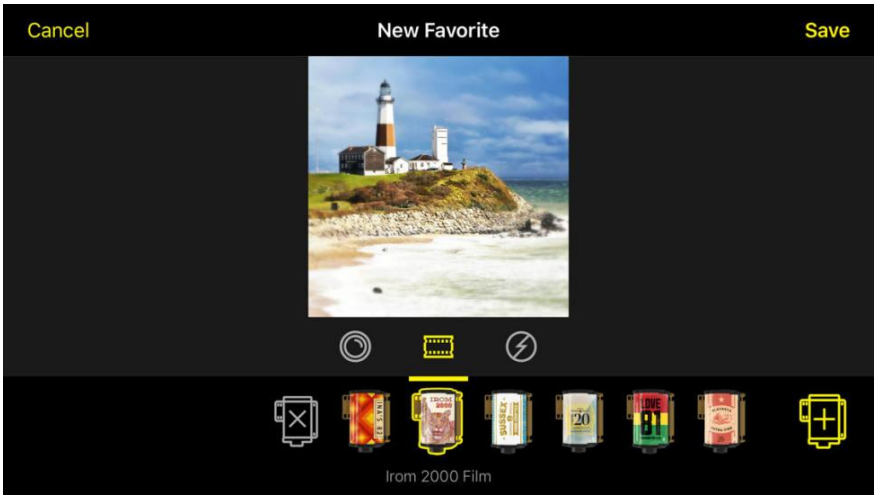
A few dozen photographs were taken of me in my youth. I remember lining up with my family on the beach while a wealthy uncle tried out a new photographic toy, and—despite the bright glare of sun off sand—being told, in grave tones, to stand completely still so as not to ruin the shot. Film and processing were quite pricey, and being photographed was an event. We were behaving just like everybody else, and there is nothing remarkable about that memory except that I remember it. Such an image world can only seem fantastically ancient to those who are used to being photographed—and photographing—every day or every hour.

A 'selfie' taken at Mandela's funeral elicited a flurry of moral panic over photographic narcissism, and the disruption of experience and memory apparently caused by the constant mediation of the lens. Various commentators declared that photography, unthinkingly and insistently made and shared, pollutes awareness of the real world and suppresses memory of anything other than the moment when the shutter opens.

Yet it is curious that some of the most popular photographic apps for phones and tablets play with nostalgia for the film snapshot. They take the sharply focused, technically and tonally smooth results delivered by advanced built-in cameras, and mess them up with simulated analogue faults and quirks: colour casts, fading, borders, softness and blur, lens distortions, burned-out highlights and pitch-black shadows. As these qualities have been banished by the

sophisticated programmes that underpin the digital snapshot, they have been reintroduced as a simulation in apps.

One origin for this enthusiasm was Lomo cameras, first taken up in the 1990s by a few photographic adepts who realised that these compact Soviet machines had remarkable low-light performance (making them well-suited to picturing night life), along with various charming optical quirks. The technical oddities of the results were complemented by a Lomo shooting style that urged photographers to embrace chance, shoot from the hip and, above all, 'Don't Think'. The cameras used film, of course, but the scanned results were widely shared online, and Lomo was remade as a brand, marketing brightly coloured plastic film cameras as fashion accessories.



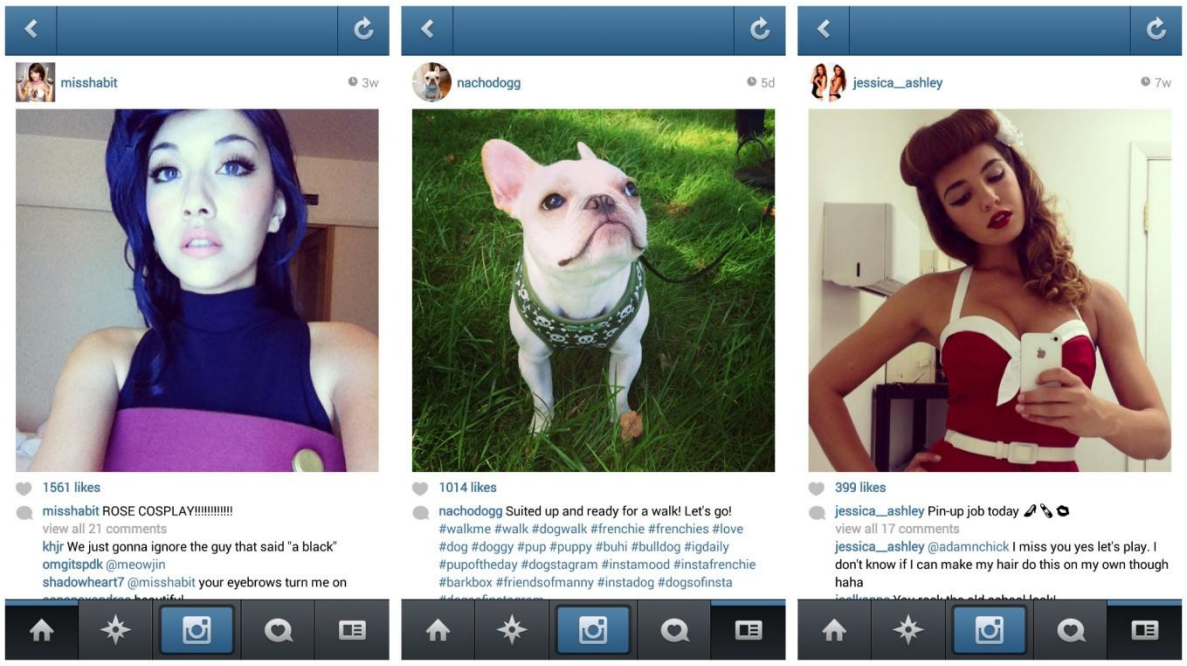
While some apps such as Hipstamatic offer a range of plug-in simulated films, flashes and lenses allowing users to finely tailor the photographic qualities that they wish to cultivate, the runaway success in this area is much simpler: Instagram claims 150 million users and around 55 million photographs uploaded daily. It allies the single-click application of a small number of readymade nostalgic filters and the equally easy uploading of the results across a variety of social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter and the photography-sharing site, Flickr. Its name, a conflation of 'Instamatic' (Kodak's snapshot cameras of the 1960s and 1970s) and 'telegram', has nostalgia built-in. The most commonly used filters alter contrast, warm or cool tones, bleach the picture or add a golden tint; their names evoke the past, places and times of day—Rise, Walden, Earlybird, 1977.

The hashtags with which pictures are categorised give strong hints about how people use Instagram: leaving out the ones that are specifically intended to generate traffic in the form of likes and comments, the most popular are love, me, tbt (Throwback Thursday, reviving old photos), cute, self, beautiful, girl, summer, happy, fun, smile… Instagram users, nine out of ten of whom are under 35, and most of whom are female, tend to use the service a lot, even at work, so its press-button simplicity is an important feature. Perhaps its very speed makes Instagram less disruptive of experience than holding a pose while a relative fiddles with differential focus settings. Generally seen on small screens, Instagram images, like telegrams or rather tweets, with which they compete, are low-resolution messages, to be glanced at rather than pored over. As with much digital culture, the experience is less of still contemplation than rapid flow.

Why the nostalgia for the Instamatic age, which extends to the emulation of the square format of 126 film, Kodak's drop-in cartridge of the 1960s onwards, and of which most Instagram users can have had no direct experience? Since so much Instagram activity is about self-presentation, a major advantage of the simulation of analogue faults is that they can be used to conceal faults in the subject, when judged against the standards of capitalist beauty. Warm-tinted films were, after all, originally designed to produce flattering skin tones. There is also a way in which the average conventional culture of the past is evoked in the conventions of the present. If Instagram's stripping of copyright from its picture makers has caused little reaction, it may be because few of its users think that they are doing anything original. There is instead a populist urge to present the common and the mundane as wonderful using past photographic quirks, accidents and faults. The look of the analogue snapshot (a discrete physical object that may fade and fray; be kept or lost; be framed, carried or stuck into an album) is knowingly and ironically invoked against the digital torrent into which images are continually thrown. While the torrent is also an archive from which each image can be pulled out by its tags, the vast majority are seen for a brief moment, rush by and are then forgotten. If the mass and flow of digital imagery tends to flatten discrimination, Instagram aesthetics, by referring to conventional standards of the past, and by seeing the present as greatly augmenting the power of those standards, raises that flattening to an ideal principle.

The standardisation of subjects and handling also extends to the behaviour of the people shown in the gestures, expressions and actions thought suitable for the lens. JR's recent display of portraits in London put those standards on public display in large, black-and-white prints pasted to hoardings and pavements (as well as being instantly shared on social media, of course, often with the subject seen holding up their portrait). Many of those who chose to be photographed,

and who broadly reflected Instagram demographics, posed with their own image-making machines—smartphones, tablets and even film cameras. Wit, as well as pleasure in conventional behaviour, was on display: one woman, seeing that leaves had fallen across the pavement images, held one up as she was photographed, bringing object and representation into close contact.



It would be easy to slip into seeing the instantly shared photographic self-portrait, along with snaps of things bought and consumed, as a register of a complete surrender to commercial image culture: the preening necessary to emulate the ideals of capitalist beauty, the apeing of celebrities, the internalising of the values of professional self-presentation, flaunting the shallow perfections of youth, erasing experience and memory through an obsession with moment-to-moment recording, and distributing the result through framing and aggregating sites that mine images and metadata for commercial value.

Yet the daily practice of photography also produces detailed knowledge about how the standard images of beauty and fame are produced, and leads to considerable sophistication about their methods and scepticism of their effects. The artifice of commercial imagery is understood through practical emulation. Most selfies are at least pastiche and many tip into parody. This increase in knowledge is accompanied by a shift in power: from the paparazzi to their willing and unwilling victims; and from the uncles, corporate and otherwise, to their nieces and nephews. Despite appearances, the digital image is much more complex than a snapshot: it is an amalgam of processed visual data, descriptive tags and the particular social network into which it is launched. When circumstances allow, it can be swiftly turned to more radical uses than recording a night out with friends.