

DISPOSABLE SIMULACRA: THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY THROUGH  
THE ANALOGUE VIEWFINDER OF THE DIGITAL AGE

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## **ABSTRACT**

Decades after their deaths, analogue aesthetics and apparatuses have been resurrected and massively recommodified. The reasons behind the analogue revival have too often been chalked up to nostalgia, consequently reducing the roles that failed economic and cultural landscapes have played in exacerbating alienation while simultaneously making its resistance consumable. Using Fredric Jameson's theory of the innate marriage between late capitalism and postmodernism—the current economic and cultural dominant paradigms—this thesis explores the alienating and destabilizing conditions imposed on the so-called millennial generation to explain why they have turned to the analogue as a way to grasp on to the “real” and resist alienation. It considers the limits of this informal struggle as one that is largely anti-capitalist but inevitably tangled in a seemingly-inescapable feedback loop of hip consumerism. This analysis will specifically look at the return of the Polaroid and the massively popular digitally-achieved Polaroid aesthetics associated with social media platforms like Instagram.

## I. INTRODUCTION

“What haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate.”

- Mark Fisher, 2012<sup>1</sup>

Were it not happening on a smart-phone—and on the Internet, for that matter—a quick scroll through social media platforms like Instagram or Facebook could teleport someone to a time when pictures covered in scratches and red-orange light leaks weren’t so often the products of a conscious aesthetic decision as they were random flaws of the exclusively-analogue photographic processes available. And yet we *are* seeing these pictures through digital screens that not only function as pocket-sized galleries, but also as the viewfinders and lightrooms that captured and stylized the majority of those images. The final product, a digital photo made to look like it was shot on film, is then born from a number of calculated aesthetic decisions. It is purposeful and glaringly intentional. This raises two questions: why have the typically-clean, high definition aesthetics of the digital world become increasingly undesirable and why has the analogue—even if digitally cultivated—been sought out as a reaction to that problem?

Broadly, it is clear that people are going to enormous lengths to capture something they feel is otherwise lacking from the digital epoch. I propose this absence be read as having resulted from capitalism’s failure to fulfill the futures it had repeatedly promised to usher into the new millennium, instead intensifying the destabilizing nature of

<sup>1</sup> Mark Fisher. "What Is Hauntology?" Film Quarterly 66, no. 1 (2012): 16-24.  
doi:10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16.



postmodernity.<sup>2</sup> This is most relevant to millennials as a generation that, in its coming of age, has been plagued by volatile economies and incredibly rapid technological and social change; it is an era plagued by unpredictability. Importantly, I also propose that the search for what is absent be read as a futile resistance against these conditions. More specifically, there are two reactions happening simultaneously. One is a protest against postmodernity through the use of analogue apparatuses as tools to reject and decelerate hyperreal elements of the digital, like the ability to edit photos to an ideal standard and therefore manufacture and warp perceptions of reality. It is in direct opposition of digitally-produced analogue aesthetics. However, the latter should not be diminished; it is equally a search for what is absent, ultimately rooted in a struggle with alienation and thus the nature of capitalism. Political theorist Fredric Jameson explains this relationship through his claim that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism. They are inherently linked, and both maintain and shape each other. When critiquing postmodernism as the cultural component, the critique then naturally extends to capitalism as its economic counterpart and vice-versa.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, by resisting hyperreality through commodifiable objects, the protest is inevitably doomed.

Nevertheless, that millennials are searching for something to connect with in the analogue is profoundly significant. The decision to shoot with a Polaroid means

<sup>2</sup> Postmodernism is very difficult to define because of its very rejection of factual certainty and universal narratives. It is also far too expansive so I will focus on hyperreality, the postmodern characteristic this thesis focuses on the most. Because I will expand on this throughout my thesis, I will only provide a brief definition here. To borrow from Jean Baudrillard, hyperreality is defined by simulations and simulacra. A simulation is characterized by a seamless blending of reality and representation, resulting in an inability to distinguish between reality and simulations of reality. When one can no longer tell the difference, the simulation becomes the real and reality ceases to exist. The human experience itself becomes a simulation. A simulacrum is an altered copy of an original that, when mass reproduced, gains more authority than the original; it becomes more real than the real thus hyperreal.

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), xxi.

photographing the definitive and the lived. It is as singular as its most popular 1:1 aspect ratio, with no negative with which to duplicate it. As for digitally-produced analogue aesthetics, they are indicative of the alienation that results from an exploitative capitalist system. Disguising the present in styles that have already proven to have *been* is an attempt to grasp whatever it means to *be*. This is a struggle with alienation, which Karl Marx described as the abstraction and loss of a natural, human essence.<sup>4</sup> What sets humans apart from other species is the ability to creatively produce from passion and imagination rather than exclusively for survival. Loss of the human essence results from being forced to sell one's labor in order to survive within a capitalist system, necessarily becoming commodities or tools for others' profits. As for the cultural, the absence of the human essence from works of art in postmodernity is understood as an absence of authenticity, which Walter Benjamin described as an object's unique, un-replicated existence in time and space.<sup>5</sup> As millennials search for more "authentic" realities in objects like the Polaroid, authenticity itself is commodified and reduced to a gimmick, made trendy only so it can go out of style. Once the Polaroid is no longer fashionable, its perceived authenticity will slowly be revived until it once again becomes a tool for protest, thus creating a vicious cycle of hip-consumerism.

This thesis will further analyze these dynamics, focusing specifically on the Polaroid instant camera and its aesthetic manifestations in an "instant" digital world. It will

<sup>4</sup> To expand upon Karl Marx's theory of alienation: Labor - and the product of a worker's labor - naturally exist as an extension of the worker and their human essence. Under capitalism, the worker is forced to sell their labor and the product of their labor; consequently, the worker is selling and therefore alienating a natural part of themselves, reducing them to a commodity to be bought and sold. The more of themselves that the worker is forced to inevitably commodify, the further removed they are from their human essence. Their human essence is now owned by someone else, the non-worker, the capitalist.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 220-222.

contextualize the search for authenticity in contemporary and distinctly postmodern developments like that of “Fake Instagrams,” the culture of remembering as memories shift into the digital world, how and why New Ageism is making its way into social media with a distorted Polaroid camera, and high fashion’s appropriation of the Polaroid.

## **II. THE MILLENNIAL CONDITION AND THE PRECARIAT**

In 1988, the Polaroid Corporation, the leader in the instant film industry, started falling into massive debt, declaring bankruptcy by 2001.<sup>6</sup> By 2008, they ceased production of their instant film and in an article published in *Wired*, the magazine stated, “this is one of those quiet moments in tech history marking the end of an era.”<sup>7</sup> A decade later, Polaroid and other instant film companies have had a sort of re-birth despite living in a digital age, largely in thanks to millennials, which Pew Research Center describes as people having been born between 1981 and 1996.<sup>8</sup> This deviation from the digital, the longing for gritty and imperfect images, is a call for authenticity and stability in the face of a seemingly ever-changing, hypercommodified world. As the first generation to come of age in the new millennium, it is one that is largely defined by shared trauma in our formative years. For example, most millennials were between the ages of 5 and 20 when the 9/11 terrorist attacks took place in the U.S. Although younger millennials may not have been able to comprehend

<sup>6</sup> Claudia H. Deutsch, “Deep in Debt Since 1988, Polaroid Files for Bankruptcy,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/13/business/deep-in-debt-since-1988-polaroid-files-for-bankruptcy.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Rob Beschizza, “Polaroid Ends Instant Film Production,” *WIRED*, February 13, 2008, <https://www.wired.com/2008/02/polaroid-ends-i/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

its significance, they fully experienced the cultural and political transition into a global “post-9/11 world,” which includes the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, increased hostility toward people of Middle Eastern descent, and the political polarization that persists today.<sup>9</sup> Another uniting factor in the millennial experience is our transition into the digital landscapes of late capitalism. To borrow from Jameson, the most impactful development in the “late” stage of capitalism is the progression of world capitalism from imperialism—marked by state rivalries—to internationalization, which is marked by the rise of multinational and transnational organizations’ ability to hold more capital and political power than any one country.<sup>10</sup> The millennial generation saw the development of technologies in the 90s responsible for the incredibly rapid expansion of globalization and the neoliberal free-market policies that followed. This would eventually lead to the 2008 recession.

Because millennials were born into the economic era of late capitalism, we were also born into the cultural era of postmodernism. Thus, we have often been described as the quintessential postmodern generation by people like Arthur Berger, Professor Emeritus in Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts at San Francisco State University (himself not a millennial). He describes the generation as one that is “so caught up in pop culture and contemporary consumer culture,” one that is inherently commercially driven.<sup>11</sup> However, if his assessment is true that millennials were *born into* postmodernism, then it could be said that the characteristics of commerciality and capitalism have been imposed

9 Richard Fry, “Millennials Are Largest Generation in the U.S. Labor Force,” Pew Research Center, April 11, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/11/millennials-largest-generation-us-labor-force/>.

10 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 88-89.

11 Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural Perspectives on Millennials*, 1st ed. 2018 edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 92.

upon us and we have reacted to *imposed* postmodernity; the notion that millennials are indiscriminately accepting of capitalism is simply not true. Rather, millennials have been forced to react to the shared trauma of unprecedented economic instability. While past generations of workers have certainly seen tumultuous economies, the issues faced by workers today are so pervasive that a new theory has arisen in the past decade that updates the language of class struggle to fit the uniquely-devastating neoliberal age. British economist and Development Studies professor at the University of London, Guy Standing, proposes the rise of a new class replacing the proletariat: *the global precariat*. Deriving from the word precarious, this class is defined by a lack of security and stability. Standing says the new group breaks with the proletariat because, “the latter terms suggest a society consisting mostly of workers in long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements...”<sup>12</sup> While this new term is in no way homogenous or exclusive to millennials, the generation does share these characteristics: After the Great Recession of 2008 in the United States, millennials were hit with the lowest employment rates since 1948. As a result, many millennials expressed that they feel vulnerable as workers and don’t feel that they can get ahead in their careers.<sup>13</sup> Similar generational trends have been observed across the globe. According to a 2018 report by independent British think-tank Resolution Foundation, millennials in their 30s in the UK, Spain, Italy, and Greece have all experienced significantly lower incomes than

<sup>12</sup> Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Reprint edition (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Taylor et al., “Young, Underemployed and Optimistic: Coming of Age, Slowly, in a Tough Economy,” Social & Demographic Trends (Pew Research Center, February 9, 2012), <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2012/02/young-underemployed-and-optimistic.pdf>.

generation X did at the same age. For example, so far, Spanish millennials in their 30s are seeing typical incomes fall by about 30% from what generation X saw at the same age.<sup>14</sup> In both Spain and the UK, this decline follows periods of strong income progress from generation to generation. Additionally, only Greece surpasses the UK's decline in earnings from 2006 to 2014 among adults under 30, with 25% and 13% drops, respectively.<sup>15</sup>

Simultaneously, the digital boom that began in the late 20th century massively accelerated as it entered the new millennium. Though new technology has been responsible for monumental advances in medicine, facilitating the spread of ideas, and creating a global community, this digital revolution has also hurt job stability. According to Charlotte Crofts, who specializes in digital cinema and pervasive media, “in this era of mass consumption and ‘update’ culture, in which the rate of technological change is more rapid than ever before, our expertise is in danger of becoming out of date even before it is fully mastered.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the most vulnerable workers run the highest risk of losing their jobs to machines due to increasing automation. According to a 2017 study conducted by the American nonprofit National Bureau of Economic Research, a 10% increase in the minimum wage results in unemployment of a significant number of low-skilled individuals who were previously fulfilling automatable positions; the effects are significant across the

<sup>14</sup> That's not to say members of generation X who are in their 40s haven't also seen their income decline from that of boomers when they were of the same age; however, the decline is less dramatic. Additionally, among nine countries examined by the think-tank, Greece is exceptional in that it is the only one where even the baby boomers are worse off than the previous generation.

<sup>15</sup> Fahmida Rahman and Daniel Tomlinson, “Cross Countries: International Comparisons of Intergenerational Trends,” Intergenerational Commission (Resolution Foundation, February 2018), <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2018/02/IC-international.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Charlotte Crofts, “Digital Decay,” *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 8, no. 2 (2008): 1–35.

board, but larger for those aged 40 and over and 25 or younger.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned to Crofts by Lionel Runkel of Technicolor, a multinational media and entertainment corporation, though automation is widely marketed as being aesthetically driven, it actually comes down to finances.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the American Psychological Association conducts an annual study regarding stress levels among the American population. According to their 2017 report, every year since 2014 they have found millennials have the highest reported stress levels in the country. Sources of stress vary by generation; the state of the economy was highest on the list for millennials, with 38% citing it as a cause of stress. Additionally, 59% believe this is the lowest point in American history.<sup>19</sup> Evidently, these shared feelings of anxiety are bound to have an impact on the overall youth culture.

### III. THE AURA IN THE AGE OF HYPERREALITY

In 1936, Walter Benjamin considered the sociological impact of reproducible film photography in his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Long before the digital age he said, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be... By making many reproductions [the technique of reproduction] substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.” His critique, which was explicitly Marxist, was concerned with the alienating effects of mass reproduction on an artwork. Mechanical

17 Grace Lordan and David Neumark, *People Versus Machines: The Impact of Minimum Wages on Automatable Jobs*, NBER Working Paper Series, no. w23667 (Cambridge, Mass: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w23667>.

18 Lionel Runkel, as cited in Crofts, “Digital Decay,” *The Moving Image* 8, no. 2 (2008): 4, interview by Charlotte Crofts, HDV Video Recording, November 24, 2006.

19 “Stress in America: The State of Our Nation” (American Psychological Association, 2017), [https://www.apa.org/images/state-nation\\_tcm7-225609.pdf](https://www.apa.org/images/state-nation_tcm7-225609.pdf).

reproduction, he claimed, resulted in the loss of something he called *the aura*, or the artwork's authenticity. He believed this extraction would have deep social consequences.<sup>20</sup> Nearly five decades after Benjamin published his essay, postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard developed the concept of hyperreality in his 1981 treatise, *Simulations and Simulacra*. According to Baudrillard, hyperreality, a defining attribute of postmodernism, is characterized by an inability to distinguish between reality, simulations of reality, and their subsequent copies.<sup>21</sup> Although all forms of photography, analogue or digital, are essentially hyperreal, it is indisputable that the speed with which the analogue could be massively reproduced is significantly less than that of the digital. Therefore, by today's standards of reproducibility, choosing analogous forms of photography can be read as a search for authenticity and an intended rejection of postmodernity and capitalism through the cameras' deceleration of hyperreality.

### *Hyperreality's Impact on Perception*

As Benjamin predicted, mechanical reproduction would have repercussions. Let us consider the effects that hyperreality has on the individual today. Emeritus professor of visual culture at the University of the West of England, Martin Lister, argues changes in how the world is visually depicted result in changes in how the world is seen, consequently resulting in changes in how the world is known and, finally, changes in the *identities* of those who do the seeing and knowing.<sup>22</sup> Digital photography has aided capitalism in this

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, "Work of Art," 220-222.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, 14th Printing edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 309.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Lister, ed., *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, 2 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.



particular way by vastly facilitating pictorial modifications; through digital means, magazines can easily touch up models and celebrities to fit a given Western ideal of beauty, commodify their touched-up, simulated image, and mass distribute it to the point that people only know celebrities as their modified selves. As Baudrillard puts it, “more real than the real, that is how the real is abolished.”<sup>23</sup> In contrast, instant analogue photography is characterized by its blunt aesthetic of unforgiving and unpredictable imperfection. Although the image itself is still only a snapshot of reality, it is based on a more faithful representation of the subject that is more difficult to alter. The film camera produces a *material* product that is unable to be replicated at half the speed of the digital, consequently maintaining a higher organic value, a more present aura. Assuming this representation of reality may be considered the *original product* of the photographer’s labor, Benjamin’s argument that, “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity,” is also applicable to the polaroid, thus acting as a tool to break down the inauthenticity of the postmodern age.<sup>24</sup>

Conversely, because of the increasingly cold and detached essence of the hyperreal, the digital age is also particularly alienating. In its states of mass material and ideological reproduction, hyperreality does to human perceptions of existence what a political economy does to a worker’s relationship to his labor. According to Marx, “the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power in size... The *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things.”<sup>25</sup> That is to say, as the projections in

<sup>23</sup> Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin. “Work of Art,” 220.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988), 32.

hyperreality are multiplied, an individual's relation to what is actually real is increasingly weakened, alienating them from their own essence and from other's own perceived (and similarly diminishing) realities. This is an argument that has been repeatedly used in regard to social media as well; much like the perceived perfection of retouched celebrities in magazines, social media users largely craft their online personas and curate their image representations to create a simulation of their ideal identity. In their book, *Plugged In: How Media Attract and Affect Youth*, founder Patti Valkenburg and director Jessica Piotrowski of the Center of Research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media write, "It is reasonable to imagine that, over time, the taking, retaking, and posting of selfies (a social media behavior) may influence not only the recipients of these selfies but also the selfie takers' self-perception."<sup>26</sup> To translate it back to Marxist terms, the social media user becomes more alienated from their own authentic self the more they self-commodify (or "self-brand") within a virtual marketplace dominated by a currency of "Likes" and "Follows."

#### IV. INSTAGRAM: THE SIMULATION

While Baudrillard acknowledges that authentic reality has become the truest, most desired utopia in postmodernity, he states that this utopia is one that is no longer a possibility. He suggests—nearly prophesizes—that the era of hyperreality "will only be able to attempt to 'artificially' resurrect the 'historical' worlds of the past... all now empty of meaning and of their original essence, but hypnotic with retrospective truth."<sup>27</sup> This is what Instagram is: an attempt to artificially recreate the analogue and place it in a

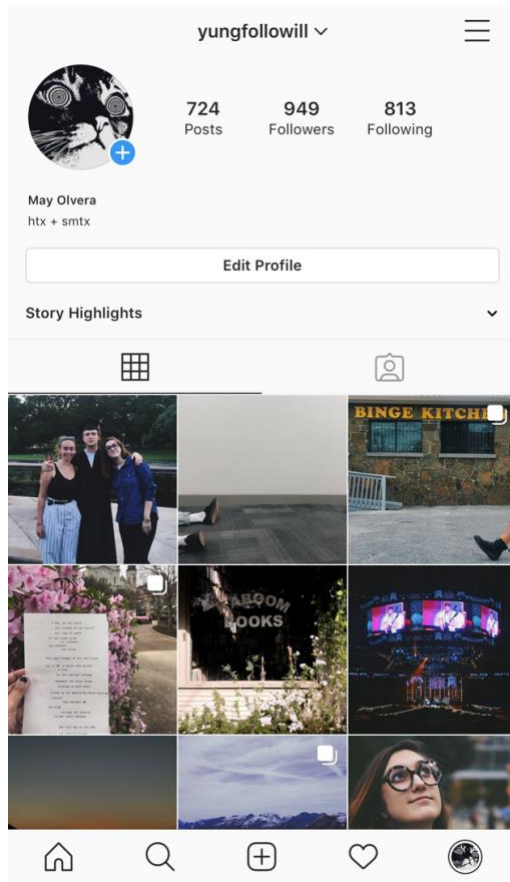
<sup>26</sup> Patti M. Valkenburg and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski, *Plugged In* (Yale University Press, 2017), <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/j.ctt1n2tvjd>, 227.

<sup>27</sup> Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 310.

digital landscape. Since its conception, Instagram's logo has always been an instant camera. Additionally, the app's name is intended to be a combination of "instant camera" and "telegram." That's the most basic way to describe what Instagram is: a platform where users can instantly share their lives with others through pictures. It didn't necessarily have to be dressed in retro fashion, but the retro gimmick—giving the simulation a "real" face—is precisely what made Instagram popular, so much so that it is no longer a simulation of the analogue, but simply real in its own respect, or hyperreal.

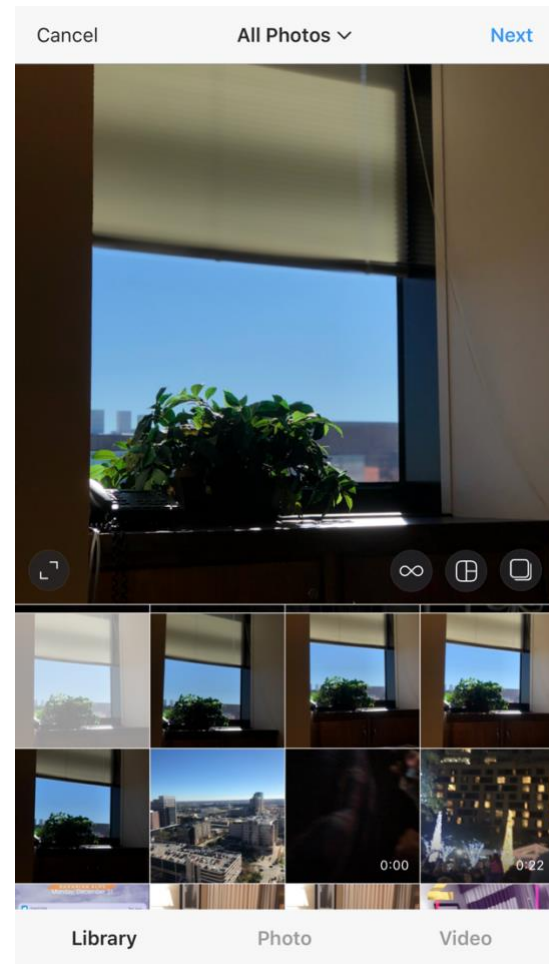
For anyone unfamiliar with the app—and because the digital world is prone to constant updates—I'll describe the very bare-bone basics of Instagram as it is today. There are two basic components from which everything else stems: a home feed and a profile. The home feed is what user sees when they first opens the app and where the bulk of social interactions happen. Instagram is based on a "follow" system, meaning that the user chooses whose content they want to see by following other users. People who choose to see someone else's content are their followers. The user can interact with their followers and the people they follow through a few different channels on their home feed; most notably, in the photo stream, which is Instagram's oldest feature. In their photo stream the user sees the most recent uploads from everyone who they follow. Most of the interactions on Instagram take place here in the form of "likes" or by leaving comments. Likewise, if a user uploads a photo to Instagram their followers will see it in their own photo streams. It will also be uploaded to the user's personal profile, where it will live among all of their other pictures. By default, pictures on a profile are viewed in a 3-column grid format with square thumbnails in descending chronological order, but they can also be viewed as a stream. The pictures the user uploads can either come from their phone's library or you can

take a new one directly from the app's camera; however, if the user choose the latter, Instagram's camera shoots in a 1:1 aspect ratio by default. As of 2015, users can upload horizontal photos with aspect ratios of up to 1.91:1 and vertical photos with aspect ratios of up to 4:5, but they will still show up as a square thumbnail on their profile's grid view.



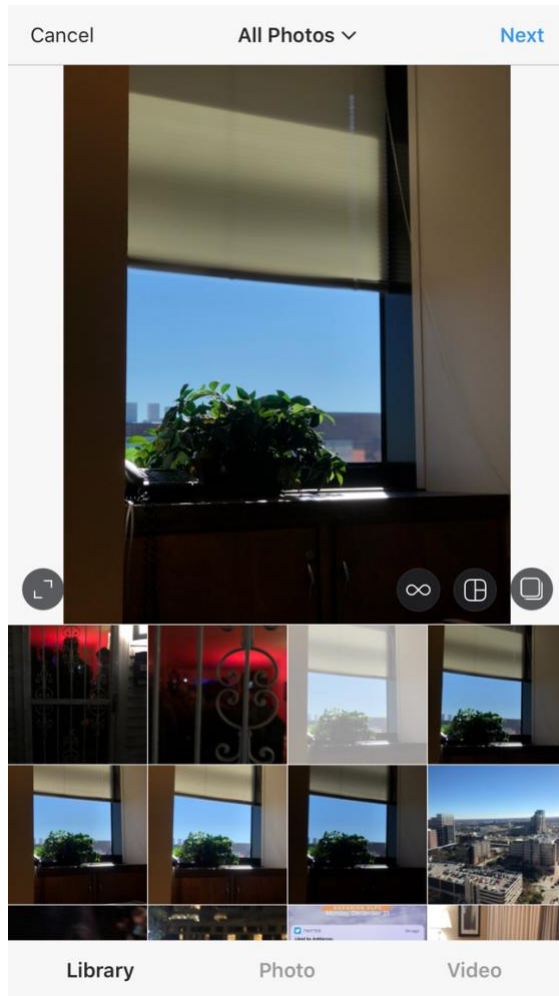
*Figure I: Instagram profile.*

This is the current layout for users' Instagram profiles. Photos are arranged in a 3-column grid in reverse chronological order. Pictures are compressed to a square format in the default grid view regardless of their full dimensions.



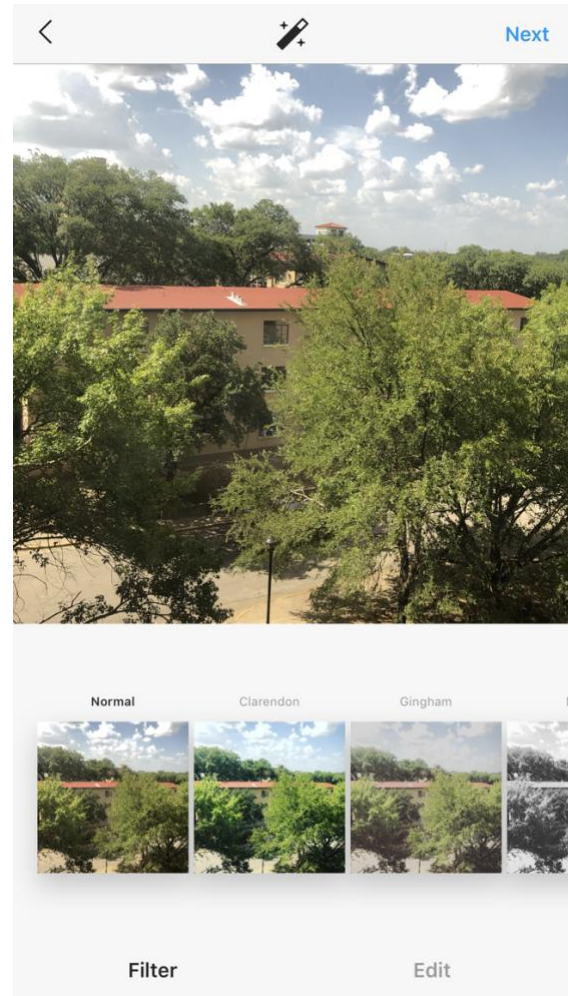
*Figure II: Posting from library.*

Users can post photos by clicking the plus sign icon seen at the bottom of Figure I. This is what it looks like when they choose a photo from their own photo library. Photos are initially cropped to a 1:1 ratio, but users can post pictures with aspect ratios of up to 1.91:1 for portrait-oriented pictures and up to 4:5 for landscape-oriented pictures by pinching the touch screen (shown in Figure III).



*Figure III: Expanded photo.*

When pinching the touchscreen in order to change photo dimensions, this is what the maximum format looks like for portrait-oriented photos.



*Figure IV: Internal camera dimensions.*

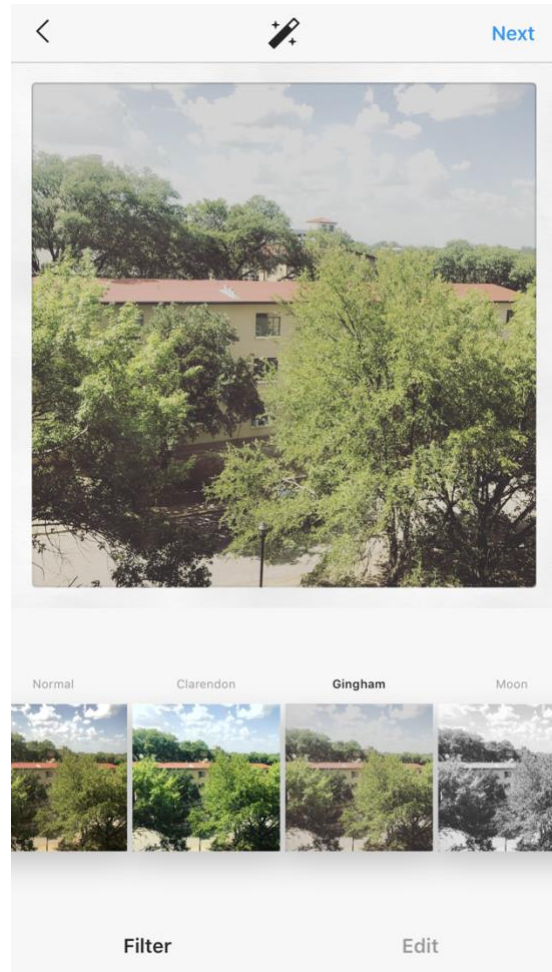
In addition to being able to post photos from their own libraries, users can also use Instagram's internal camera. Users cannot toggle the dimensions from the internal camera and are constrained to a 1:1 aspect ratio. As soon as the picture is snapped, they are taken to the editing screen shown. Here, they have 40 internal filters to choose from.





*Figure V: 1977 filter.*

Instagram's 1977 filter gives photos the colors of film that has been developed in an overly-warm environment. When developed at warmer temperatures, Polaroid's take on a warm cast that makes blue skies appear pink and gives the picture an overall yellow, orange or pink tint.



*Figure VI: Gingham filter and border.*

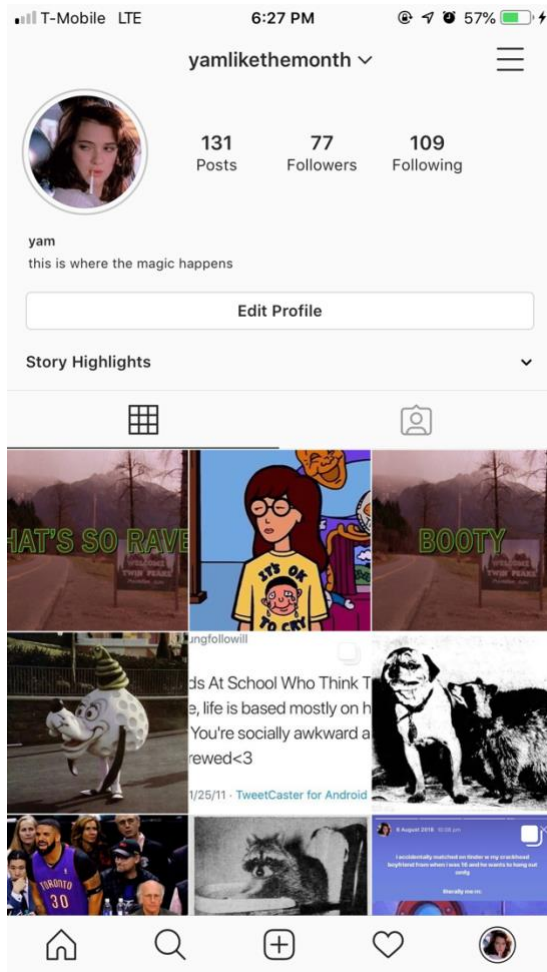
Many filters also come with their own optional borders. For example, the Gingham filter has a white square border reminiscent of peel-apart instant film. The low-contrast, fading colors of the filter are also very similar to that of Polaroids taken in bright, warm conditions.

*“Instagram” vs “Fake Instagram”*

An interesting byproduct of self-commodification and alienation in the virtual marketplace is the growing phenomenon of “fake Instagrams” or “Finstas.” Finstas tend to be one part of a user’s dual Instagram presence. They are an alternative to what would be considered a “main account,” which is often referred to as the “real Instagram” or “Rinsta.” The Rinsta is usually a public account accessible to anyone on Instagram or a private account that includes many followers who might be acquaintances, work colleagues, family, etc. In contrast, Finstas are usually always private and have usernames that do not immediately give away the user’s identity, though they might include some sort of less-obvious hint. Most importantly, since Instagram allows users to accept or reject who follows their private accounts, Finstas always have a much more selective following made up only of trusted friends. The user is able to create a safe-haven where they can post unedited, unflattering pictures or a wide range of content they would not post publicly. Finstas, then, may be described as a more transparent expression of the user’s true self, made necessary by the hyperconnectivity of social media as a simulation of a society where it is in one’s best interest to abide by social mores and aesthetic standards. Of course, we cannot ignore that the authentic is called *fake* and the perhaps-inauthentic *real* in this scenario. Baudrillard would argue that both the Finsta and Rinsta are equally hyperreal, but one is called fake simply to uphold an illusion that there is such a thing as reality at all.<sup>28</sup>

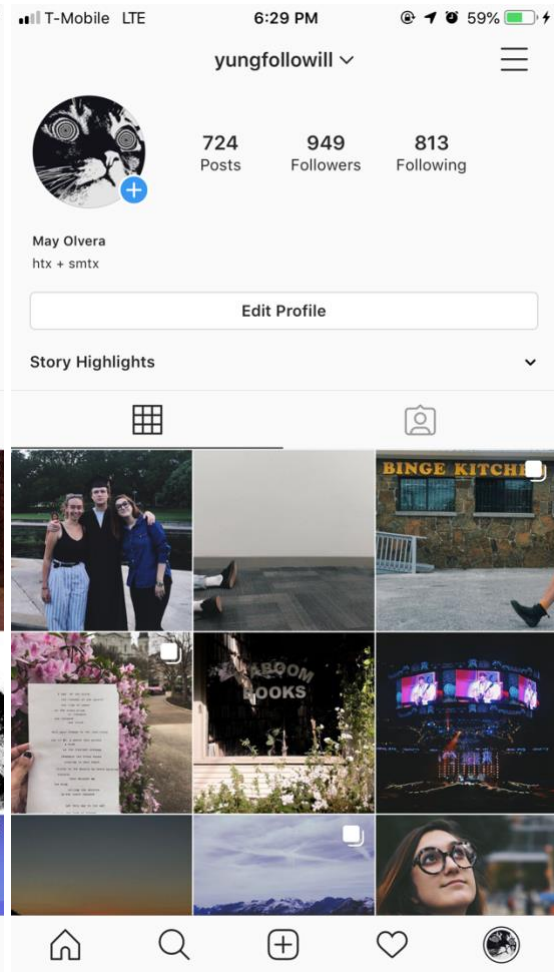
<sup>28</sup> Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 10.





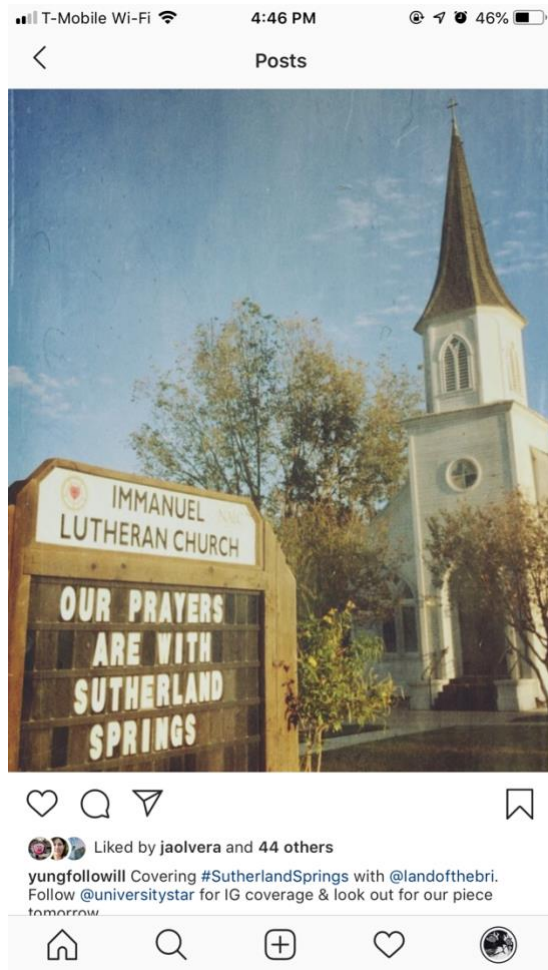
*Figure VII: Finstagram profile.*

This is my own Finstagram profile. In comparison to my Rinstagram profile in Figure VIII, it has very different content. While I only allow 77 people to follow my private Finsta, my public Rinsta allows anyone to follow me. Although I have vague identifiers on my Finsta, such as my name spelled backwards, I don't outright identify myself with my first and last names like I do in my Rinsta.



*Figure VIII: Rinstagram profile.*

My Rinstagram profile includes my name, where I live, and photos of myself that I have decided can be public. Rather than acting as a semi-private diary like my Finsta, my Rinsta acts like more of a portfolio with more conventionally-appealing photos.



*Figure IX: Rinstagram post.*

Because I am studying journalism, my Rinsta serves as a place where I can promote my writing and other professional endeavors.



*Figure X: Finstagram post.*

In contrast, my Finsta mostly includes content that serves absolutely no professional or commercial purpose. Rather, what I post on there is meant to be read as somewhat of a stream of consciousness.

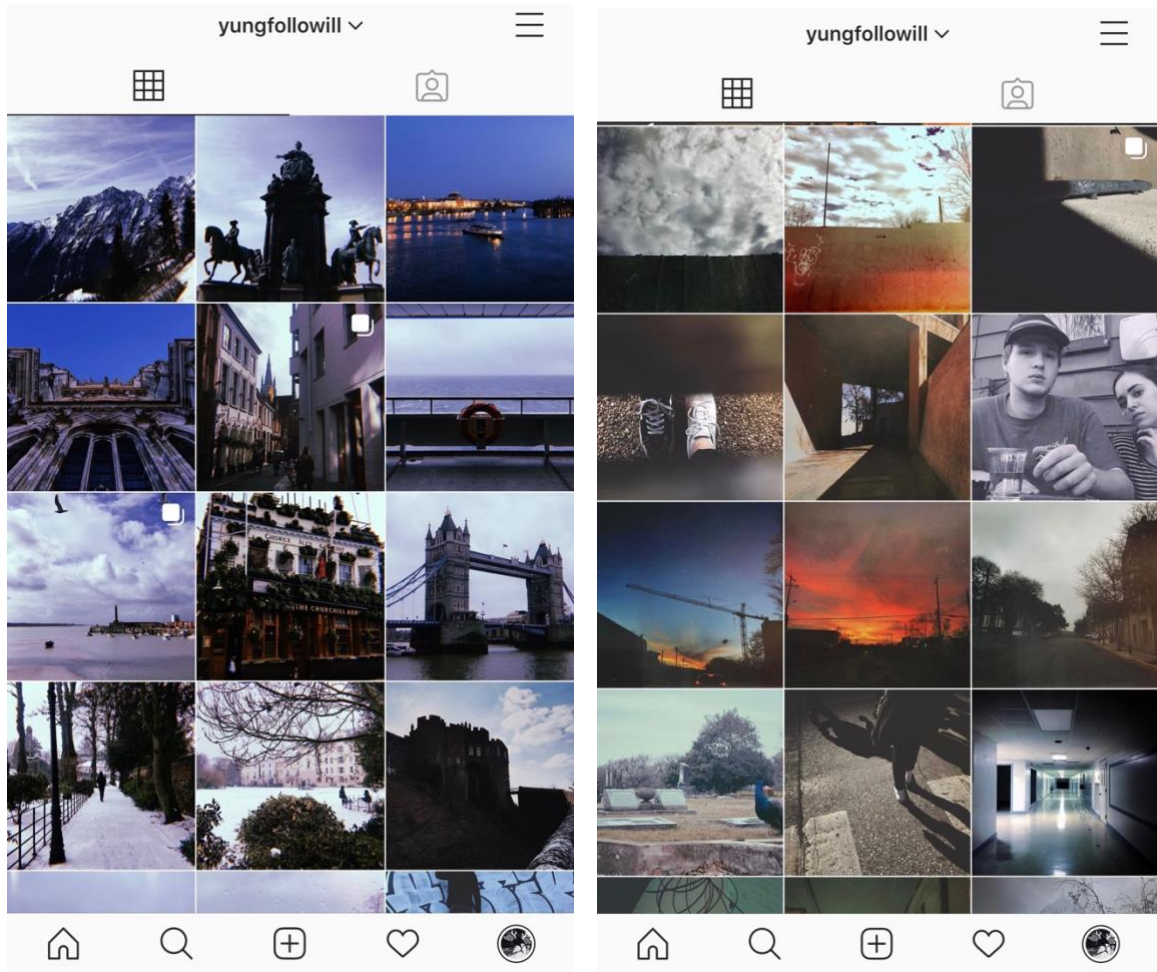
### *Memories in the Simulation*

Originally, Instagram users were restricted to the 1:1 aspect ratio because it was typical of the SX-70 Polaroid camera that it sought to imitate. Likewise, Instagram's internal filters encourage users to give their photos the colors and borders of old, faded Polaroids—the kind one might find stored away in a box of old family pictures and then upload to Instagram on Mother's Day to show friends how cool your mom was in the 80s. Baudrillard touches on this when he diagnoses the postmodern age as one of “implosion” rather than explosion and expansion, of striving to give simulations “the colors of the real, the banal, the lived.”<sup>29</sup> He suggested that it would become impossible to tell the difference between the real and the simulation; whether that's true yet when comparing a Polaroid to an Instagram post is debatable. However, the success that Instagram has found through its aesthetic branding has arguably made it functionally indistinguishable from the box of family photos in which the old Polaroids sit. Social media platforms built with the intention of being where “*it*” was happening are now at an age where it has happened. Instagram just happens to have dressed the part from the beginning. Many people might not even realize this transition has taken place yet, but Instagram and its parent company Facebook certainly do. This year, Instagram released a “Memories” feature similar to Facebook's “On This Day,” which reminds users of pictures they posted on the same day in previous years. In some ways, one might call this a “natural” progression. But it's hypernatural. The simulation has become hyperreal and concerningly unsustainable.

While the digital tends to be seen as ever-lasting and permanent, this is a big misconception. Digital photographs won't fade and decay with time, but they will lose file

<sup>29</sup> Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 311.

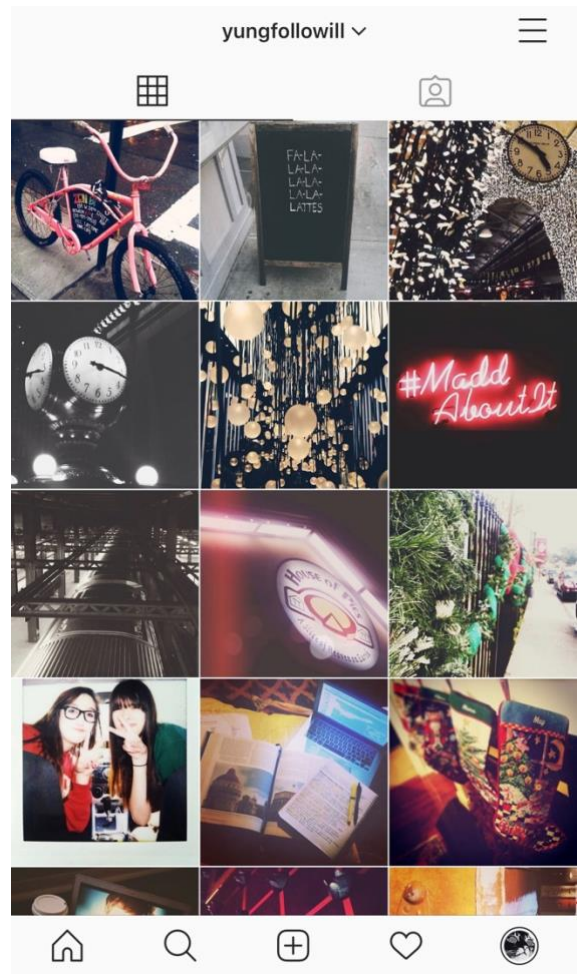
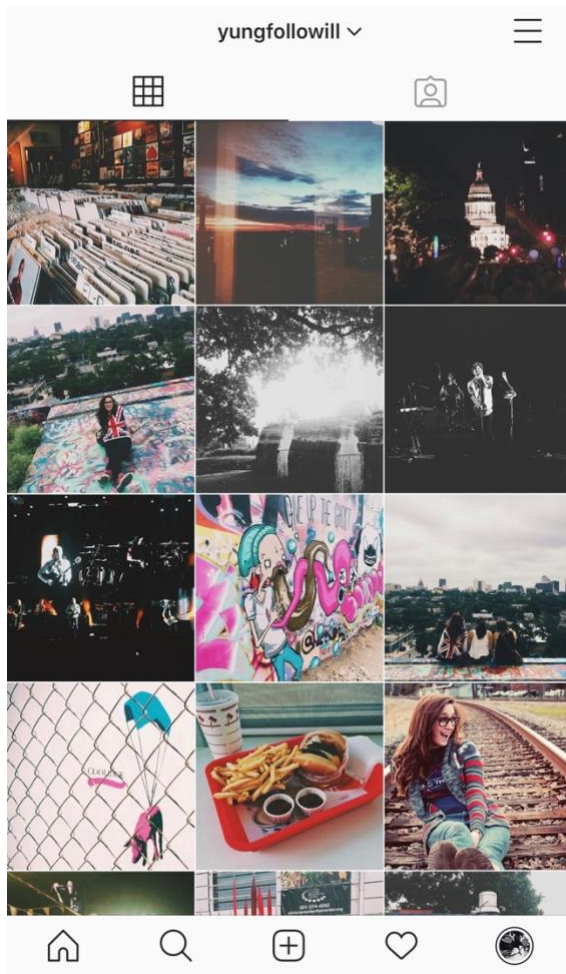
compatibility with newer technology or simply get deleted without the chance of recovery. It's extremely likely that most of the pictures that are born digitally will disappear if they are never printed. Speaking personally, I currently have 724 images posted to my Instagram profile, spanning all the way back to 2011. This and my Facebook profile are home to the only pixels of proof that I have of the most important moments of my life, like when I adopted my puppy and the first time I fell in love with a boy, or when I started my first high school job and saw my favorite band for the first time, or when I moved three hours away from home to go to college and then four years later to another continent for a semester abroad. It holds years—nearly a decade, so far—of memories that I, without a doubt, want to look back on 50 years from now; however, losing them is far easier than it is to lose a box of pictures or a scrapbook. It doesn't take a natural disaster to lose those 724 memories. Losing them is as easy as forgetting a password or, worse, Instagram deciding I've violated their terms and conditions—erasing my account. All of those memories, everything that makes up the narrative of who I've been and therefore who I am, are effectively owned by Instagram. Not only that, but advertisers can also buy spaces to advertise between the most meaningful moments of my life and it's in my interest, if I want to keep those memories, that they remain there so Instagram doesn't go out of business. If we are even so lucky as to see these personal archives survive long enough, we will have to reconsider the entire culture that surrounds the act of remembering as personal memories continue to transition into commercialized channels. Again, this is a case where analogue processes can be seen as a stabilizing tool in the age of hyperreality.

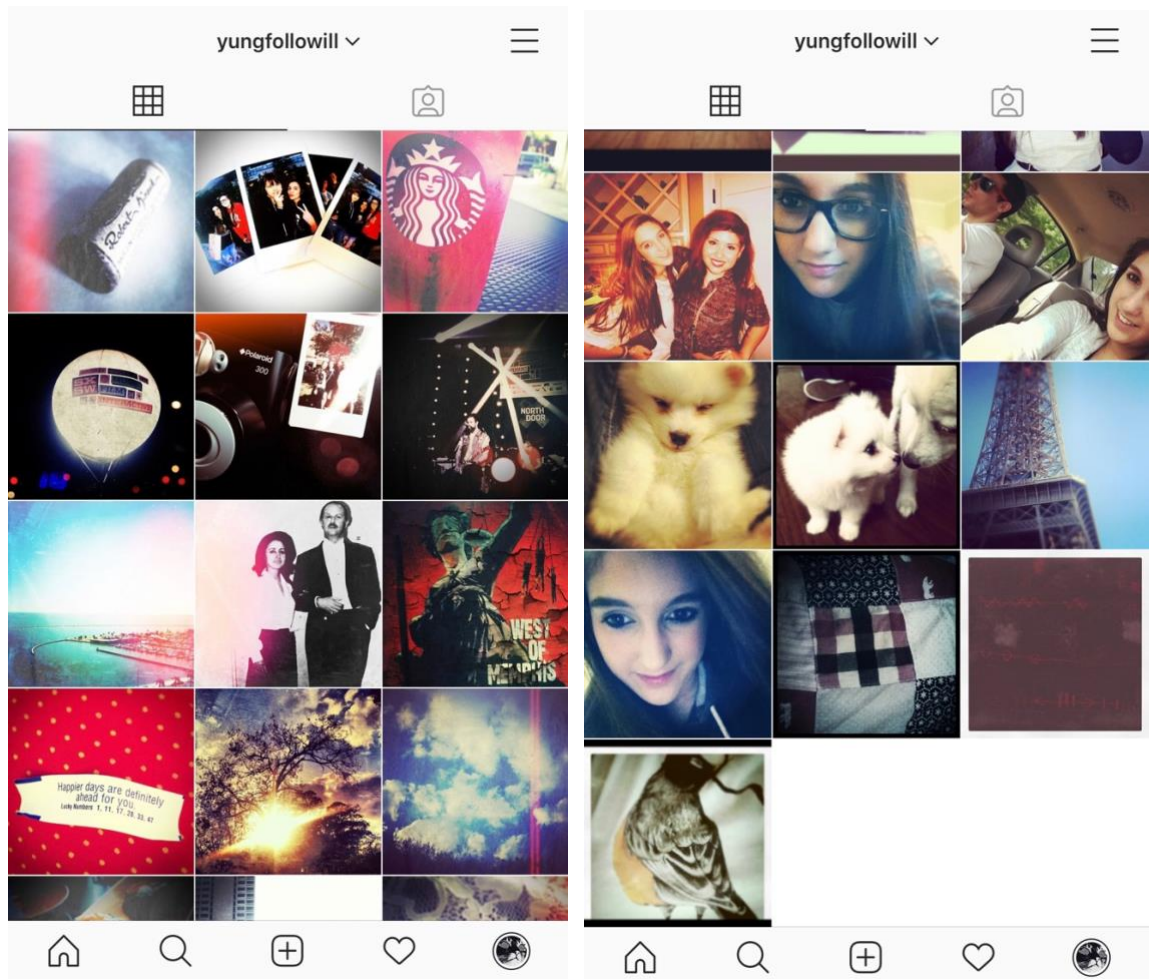


*Figures XI-XVI: Multiple Instagram posts.*

These are multiple eras of my Instagram profile, starting with pictures from 2018 and going back to my first post in 2011. Although the aesthetics have changed throughout, they signify different stylistic attempts at digitally recreating analogue aesthetics. They also document nearly a decade of my life through retro filters while themselves becoming archival documentation.







## V. A FUTILE RESISTANCE

### *Vogue Italia: Selling Proximity to the Aura*

Whereas up to this point I've discussed millennials seeking authenticity in the Polaroid in order to resist postmodernity by decelerating hyperreality, this is a case of those who create markets for hyperreal reproductions by making the original desirable but unattainable, simultaneously sustaining their own financial access to the original. This can be pinpointed in the way in which industries play into what Benjamin described as "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly." Benjamin says the masses are determined to accept reproduction as reality to overcome its

inaccessibility: “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.”<sup>30</sup> This all comes together in Vogue Italia’s February 2017 “Polaroid Issue,” a strange media concoction that, in all of its high-fashion hyperreality, could really only be a product of our postmodern era. The 41-page spread—which includes four different covers all featuring Madonna—was shot by photographer Steven Klein, whose style has even previously been described as “hyperreal.”<sup>31</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Vogue Italia’s *Polaroid Issue* has been made widely available on their website for anyone to access.<sup>32</sup> At a time when it’s completely normal for publications to hide their digital content behind paywalls, the move to make a special print issue entirely digitally accessible means it serves an obvious commercial purpose. As an artwork that was not born in the digital world—in fact, one that had to go through various stages of modification and reproduction to even become a physical magazine—it lives in the digital realm as a projection devoid of most of its original artistic detail but full of evidence that those details exist and, more importantly, that you missed out on them. Though a print version of the magazine is still not as desirable as the original photographs or the clothes and people they represent, the existence of a “less real” digital version creates the illusion that the glossy pages of the print edition are, comparatively, grounded in more truth. Therefore, they make the customer feel as if they are closing a larger part of the gap between themselves and the artworks aura than they would have if the “less authentic”

30 Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 220.

31 “Steven Klein Is One of the 500 People Shaping the Global Fashion Industry in 2018,” The Business of Fashion, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/community/people/steven-klein>.

32 Di Redazione, “Vogue Italia Febbraio 2017: The polaroid issue,” Vogue Italia, February 14, 2017, <https://www.vogue.it/moda/cover-fashion-stories/2017/02/15/vogue-italia-febbraio-2017-the-polaroid-issue>.



reproduction hadn't existed. *Vogue Italia* takes this illusion further by controlling how many print copies they distribute. Based on total gross reach, *Vogue Italia* has a print readership of approximately 726 thousand monthly readers.<sup>33</sup> However, they only release approximately 101 thousand copies of each issue into circulation.<sup>34</sup> Essentially, they are able to manufacture a distribution model that requires the purchase to be intentional enough to make it feel like an act of labor and the magazine the customer's earned product. For most people, a copy of the print magazine is as close as they'll ever get to closing the gap with the aura. However, now they can feel like they belong to the same world as the elite few who did get to close the gap at a 2017 Milan Fashion Week soiree aptly titled "An Issue by Steven Klein" at the Palazzo Serbelloni.

In *Vogue Italia*'s post-event writeup, they describe the 18th-century palace as having been turned into a 90s underground New York nightclub, with Klein's Polaroids recreating "the atmosphere and style of the cultural and imaginative melting pot of the end of the millennium, with its contradictions, its disturbing dichotomies and the electricity of the years in which one felt that everything was on the verge of happening."<sup>35</sup> Evidently, the event romanticizes the 90s specifically because the new millennium hadn't yet arrived to steal the excitement of a future imagined. It implies a preference for how the future seemed rather than how it played out, a longing for anticipation that perhaps no longer

<sup>33</sup> "Brands and Footprint," Condé Nast International, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://www.condenastinternational.com>. Additionally, *Vogue Italia*'s digital presence is listed as having 3.7 million unique digital users and 6.2 million social media followers. For comparison, *Vogue Paris* is the largest European edition with 1.4 million monthly print readers, 2.2 million digital users, and 13.4 million followers. *Vogue Ukraine* is the smallest with 110,600 monthly print readers, 6 thousand digital users, and 4.9 thousand followers.

<sup>34</sup> "Vogue Italia General Media Kit," Media Kit (Italy: Condé Nast Italia, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Di Redazione, "An Issue By Steven Klein: l'evento," *Vogue Italia*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.vogue.it/news/appuntamenti-eventi/2017/02/25/steven-klein-february-issue-event-vogue-italia>.

exists. However, that's its only concern: the loss of excitement and anticipation. These are not the same lost futures that haunt the millennials experience, yet *Vogue Italia* bring themselves close enough to be part of a larger moment while decidedly drawing a distinction between themselves that enforces social hierarchy. This is seen within the magazine as well. Without looking through the spread, it would be fair to expect its pages be filled with the familiar SX-70 or Spectra Polaroid film that most people associate with instant photography. However, Klein only uses this film on two occasions, instead opting for a much rarer and more elaborate 8x10 format for the vast majority of his pictures.<sup>36</sup> Whereas one pack of film with 10 photos for the smaller formats costs \$15-\$20, a film pack for the 8x10 Polaroid costs approximately \$180. Aside from dimensions, a key difference of the 8x10 is it requires a separate film processor. In other words, the photo doesn't come out of the camera; instead, the film must be processed through a large device that looks like a printer and it must be manually peeled apart and dried. It is a much more complex process than that of the truly-instant Polaroids and there is a clear difference in its superior photo quality. The superior quality makes the 8x10 photos feel more editorialized and therefore more hyperreal. Klein has no interest in natural depictions. This is consistent with the hyperreal nature of fashion magazines mentioned in a previous section, editing celebrities to fit flawless Western beauty standards and distribute their images to the point that people know them as their modified selves. Because those standards are intentionally difficult for the average person to obtain, fashion magazines are often hard to relate to. Klein creates a contradiction between the familiarity and relatability of the Polaroid and the coldness of

<sup>36</sup> "How To Work With Impossible 8x10 Film" (The Impossible Project), accessed June 15, 2019, [https://www.filmsnotdead.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/8x10\\_user\\_manual.pdf](https://www.filmsnotdead.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/8x10_user_manual.pdf).

postmodern, commercial celebrity culture. He takes it to absurd and self-aware lengths; instead of relying on editing programs to create unattainable beauty standards, he uses the Polaroids themselves. One of his covers, for example, shows three Polaroids merged together to create a deconstructed and then reconstructed Madonna with three hands and an impossibly long torso and arms. The middle photo and focal point is of Madonna's chest in a see-through chiffon shirt with her nipples partially covered by two pairs of Klein's initials, objectifying and branding her. He immediately subverts the notion that a Polaroid issue would be preoccupied with more natural representations and instead uses analogue means to take the concept of "unrealistic beauty standards" through picture retouching to an extreme degree.



*Figure XVII: One of Steven Klein's three Vogue Italia Polaroid Issue covers.*

### *Spiritual Exploitation of the Polaroid on Instagram*

In the last few years, Instagram has been filled with mentions of the aura as it relates to analogue photography and, specifically, Polaroids. However, it's not quite the same aura Benjamin referenced in his work. Whereas he referred to the aura of the artwork itself, people are turning toward "aura photography" to capture their own metaphysical energy and upload it to social media. This is made possible by a machine thrown together like Frankenstein's monster to create a distorted Polaroid camera, but it is indicative of much more than analogue aesthetics making their way into the digital world. It signifies a simulation of an aesthetically "retro" spiritual, anti-scientific movement becoming increasingly digitally present in order to exploit financial stress.

Allegations of clairvoyance—the so-called "6th sense," or the ability to perceive information unobtainable through the physical senses—are hardly new and are the basis for a wide range of religious and spiritual movements; however, scientific claims of photo processes able to translate that information—specifically, the aura—can be traced back to a process called Kirlian photography developed in 1939 and studied in the 70s during the rise of the New Age movement. New Ageism is difficult to define but, generally, the movement believed greater spiritual consciousness was possible and that a wide-spread spiritual awakening could be globally transformative. Unfortunately, the movement was too vague in any rejection of capitalism and much clearer on its support of pseudoscience like Kirlian photography. Although the process had been widely disproved, a California entrepreneur named Guy Coggins developed the commercial AuraCam 6000 in 1992—which he described as "intensified Kirlian imaging"—creating a market for Aura Imaging

photography.<sup>37</sup> Using hand sensors that record physiological data much the same way a lie detector test does, the AuraCam 6000—priced just under \$10 thousand—translates the readings into corresponding colors to produce a double-exposed Polaroid portrait superimposed with intense clouds of color—the alleged aura—to be interpreted through an arbitrary color key like a full-body mood ring.<sup>38</sup> Of course, Coggins’ company website describes the process much more colorfully while keeping everything intentionally vague, their most specific page being a highly misleading “profitability guide.”<sup>39</sup> Overall, it’s difficult to imagine their website does much to convince buyers to make such a big investment. Nonetheless, people are being convinced and the steadily-growing collection of pictures tagged as “#auraphotography” on Instagram, currently sitting at 14.7 thousand, probably has more to do with it. The Ringer published a particularly captivating article in November 2018 by journalist Molly McHugh called “How Aura Photography Invaded

37 Joe Nickell, “Photographing the Aura,” in *Real-Life X-Files*, Investigating the Paranormal (University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 142–49, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/j.ctt2tv655.25>.

The process applied a high-voltage, high-frequency electrical discharge across a grounded object, yielding a supposed aura that was then recorded onto a photographic plate, film, or paper. However, evidence suggests the resulting air-glow is attributable to mechanical, environmental, and photographic factors like moisture and finger pressure.

38 Pete Brook, “Aura Portraits Make Good Art, Bad Science,” *WIRED*, February 25, 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/02/aura-portraits/>. According to Wired, this is done during a 10-second double exposure in which subjects place each hand on one of two boxes fitted with biofeedback receptors, allegedly measuring their electromagnetic field by monitoring acupressure points that correspond to spiritual energy channels. An attached data converter translates the energy readings into frequencies that correspond to certain colors returned to the camera. The camera’s first exposure of two seconds produces the original Polaroid portrait and then, based on the data returned to the camera, the second exposure of six to eight seconds superimposes the color clouds and printed on Fuji FP-100C, Polaroid 108, or Polaroid 669 film stock.

39 “Aura Camera & Photography Business Profitability Chart,” Aura Imaging, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://www.auraphoto.com/resources/profitability/>. The guide shows the weekly, monthly, and yearly net profits possible based on the price of film and a monthly warranty charge and under the assumption that one sells an average of 10 pictures per day priced at \$25 per picture with the variable being however many days one chooses to work per week. According to the guide, one would only have to work one day per week to make a net yearly profit of \$11,284. However, with their “Payment & Financing” page containing only a form for bank and credit card payments, they fail to mention anywhere on their website that a new AuraCam 6000 costs approximately \$10 thousand, instead directing people to inquire directly.

Instagram.” In the article, the owner of the Los Angeles-based aura photography business Auradome, Julia Summers, confirms that seeing aura photographs on her Instagram feed convinced her to make the \$10 thousand AuraCam investment and start photographing at events on a pop-up basis.<sup>40</sup> In the year since, Auradome has gained 3,170 Instagram followers. However, the full scope of aura photography’s current popularity may be best understood through Christina Lonsdale and her touring project, Radiant Human, who currently tout 98.2 thousand Instagram followers. Lonsdale is currently doing a sold-out 4-month residency at The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. On her website she describes herself as having been “raised on mysticism at the dawn of the digital age — formative years when science and spiritualism occupied equal bandwidth.” This is precisely what is concerning about rising influence of aura photography on Instagram. The scientific and the spiritual should not be allotted equal bandwidth indiscriminately. The belief that the scientific has as much basis in truth as the mystical is unmistakably characteristic of postmodernism. Thus, it is indicative of a larger economic issue as well, one that should be responsibly addressed. For example, the National Science Foundation found in 2016 that 44% of adults ages 18-34 consider astrology to be at least “sort of scientific.”<sup>41</sup> This has a relationship to the psychological concept of the “locus of control,” or how much power people believe they have over their lives. According to a 1981 study examining the characteristics of people who consult astrologers, the most significant determining factors is high stress levels followed by feelings of having little political

<sup>40</sup> Molly McHugh, “How Aura Photography Invaded Instagram,” *The Ringer*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.theringer.com/tech/2018/11/15/18050140/aura-photography-instagram-auracam6000-christina-lonsdale-new-age>.

<sup>41</sup> Beethika Khan et al., “Science and Engineering Indicators 2018,” *Science & Engineering Indicators* (U.S.: National Science Board, 2018), <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2018/nsb20181/assets/nsb20181.pdf>.

control.<sup>42</sup> The American Psychology Association's findings that millennials are the most stressed generation in America and that they believe this is the lowest point in American history may be related to their feelings of low control over their lives.<sup>43</sup>

Lonsdale goes on to describe her work as “a discipline that shores up the distance between New Age self-discovery and New Media self(ie)-actualization.” Although the ideological parameters of New Ageism are unclear, there are concepts and tools used by enough New Age groups to be associated with New Ageism that are resurfacing and resonating with a significant amount of young people today beyond just aura photography. This includes alternative medicine and holistic health practices like herbal supplements, acupuncture, aromatherapy, yoga, meditation, and healing crystals. It also includes belief in the law of attraction and esoteric practices like tarot card reading and astrology.<sup>44</sup> And it's not surprising that these are resonating with young people today. According to a 2016 study by the Transamerica Center for Health Studies, 21% of millennials say they cannot afford routine healthcare expenses while an additional 26% say they can afford healthcare but with difficulty. They also found that nearly half of millennials have minimized healthcare costs by skipping, delaying, or stopping care. Instead, millennials have begun opting for alternative medicine, turning the herbal dietary supplement industry into its own multibillion-dollar industry.<sup>45</sup> That's not to say that alternative options are necessarily

42 G.A. Tyson, “People Who Consult Astrologers: A Profile,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 3, no. 2 (January 1, 1982): 119–26, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869\(82\)90026-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869(82)90026-5).

43 “Stress in America.”

44 J. Gordon Melton, “New Age Movement,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 7, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/New-Age-movement>.

45 “Transamerica Center for Health Studies ® Survey: Millennial Survey: Young Adults' Healthcare Reality,” Survey (Transamerica Center for Health Studies, 2015), <https://www.transamericacenterforhealthstudies.org/docs/default-source/research/tchs-2016-millennial-survey-embargoed.pdf>.



harmful, but their popularity signifies larger issues than they are capable of addressing. The spread of New Ageism on Instagram impedes progress that could be made toward addressing the very issues that make the spiritual desirable, like stress, political nihilism, and the inaccessibility of healthcare. Instead, they offer massively profitable non-solutions that actively normalize harmful anti-scientific attitudes. This brings Fisher back to mind; he says, “the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live. It meant the acceptance of a situation in which culture would continue without really changing, and where politics was reduced to the administration of an already established (capitalist) system.”<sup>46</sup> In this context, the capitalist system that has made it extremely difficult for many millennials to receive proper health care—which could result in their death—has done away with the sort of social imagination that could provide real solutions to radically transform society. Instead, past aesthetics of the New Age movement have become newly-popular and profitable in order to evade addressing the issue.

Likewise, Baudrillard’s assertions, when joined by Jameson’s claim of the innate marriage between capitalism and postmodernism, suggest this inevitable roadblock in this embrace of the analogous. To quote columnist JoAnn Wypijewski:

‘There is no liberation movement that has not been meat for the absorptive power of capitalism. The youth movements, the black movement, the gay movement, the women’s movement, every freedom cry... has revealed the octopus-like nature of the system, its singular

<sup>46</sup> Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?”, 16.

genius to grasp onto the new, the bold, the angry, and try to turn it into an ad, a product, a consumable pose or cover for its own crude business. That is the power and simultaneous pitfall of social liberation struggles under capitalism, and so the struggle is never finished.”<sup>47</sup>

It is evident that the alienating nature of capitalism makes it incredibly difficult to find sources of authenticity that don’t simultaneously feed the problem of capitalist alienation. Indeed, capitalists—who had once deemed the analogous obsolete—have now not only re-commodified its aesthetic, but consequently commodified the hunger for authenticity that made it newly profitable. According to Marx, “a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, the authenticity found in the analogous becomes alien, drained of all of its significance; it becomes something to be bought and sold. As a result, authenticity is sought out elsewhere, replicating the relationship between analogue and digital and replacing it with another, creating an endless feedback loop between the cultural and the economic.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The Polaroid Corporation’s initial decline in popularity and eventual halt in production did not mark the end of an era; rather, it was a natural progression in an endless postmodern feedback loop. As soon as instant film went out of style, its perceived

<sup>47</sup> JoAnn Wypijewski, “The Year in Sex (or Pop Goes the Weasel),” December 26, 2013, <https://www.thenation.com/article/year-sex-or-pop-goes-weasel/>.

<sup>48</sup> Karl Marx, “The Commodity,” in *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Reprint edition, vol. 1, 3 vols. (London ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 1992).

authenticity slowly increased until it became a source of retrospective truth. Inevitably, it was re-commodified in the second analogue wave. Soon enough it will go out of style again only to rebuild its potential as a tool to break down alienation and the loop will continue. The rejection of the digital is, paradoxically, a rejection of the postmodern and a result of postmodernism. Because postmodernism is so strongly entangled with late capitalism, it is not entirely surprising that a generation that has been plagued by economic hardships and the broken promises of unrealized futures is reacting in such a way. However, the struggle from alienation is impossible to realize so long as it continues to take place on a capitalist battleground. Until the economic and the cultural are both radically redefined, the past will remain both alluring and empty.

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