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The Phenomena of the 21st Century Image: Instagram Iconography as an Extension of the Dominant Ideological Order

Abstract: In the digital and information society in which we live right now, image has the special status of one of the most attractive ways to communicate with others, transmit meaning and define one's identity. Following Manovich's theoretical concepts of Instagram class and *Instagramism*, I analyze the image shared via this platform in order to understand how it corresponds with current social and ideological paradigms. My premise is that Instagram image and its meaning and semantic structure are highly determined by dominant neoliberal and capitalist norms and values, class differences and power relations. It is formed by unwritten social codes that give visibility only to certain lifestyles, choices and preferences that reflect westernized upper classes. These social codes, along with aesthetic norms that make up what *Instagramism* is, deny adequate representations to marginalized groups and classes whose identity cannot fit into this cultural prototype. Therefore, Instagram as a platform and image that it produces are dominantly elitist and pro-capitalist by their very nature.

Keywords: social media; image; Instagram; semiotics; myth; technology; culture; social class; ideology; capitalism; neoliberalism; power relations.

Along with the abundance of information in today's society, *image* has positioned itself as the most appealing and dominant way of transmitting significance and information. It has the power to capture people's attention and expose them to the subtlest structure of significances, power relations and current ideological premises. It is one of the pillars on which digital culture is based and it has helped create numerous new branches in the commercial and entertainment industries. In favor of this enormous popularity and rapid expansion of image as the most dominant type of text (in a broad sense of the word) goes the fact, common in popular discourse, that people's attention span, while consuming content online, is constantly shrinking¹

¹ Kalpathy Ramaiyer Subramanian, "Myth and the Mystery of Shrinking Attention Span," *International Journal of Trend in Research and Development* 5 (2018): 1.

due to ever-growing amount of information they are exposed to and that, therefore, visual content is easier to consume and slowly overtakes the written. Apart from that, semiotic image, in the digital age, is inseparable from the semiotics of technology by which it is mediated. Contemporary image has its own set of rules and responds to the challenges posed by new technologies. Technology and image in the digital age combined together condition how people create their identity and represent their social status and community structure through an image. With all this in mind, contemporary image represents the intersection between ideology in its two forms: technology and software on the one hand and content and its cultural and ideological background on the other.

Even though it is hard to find a platform nowadays that does not include a word *visual* or *image* in its description at some point, I decided to focus my research mainly on Instagram because of its purely visual nature. Here, images represent the primary means of communication, while text is of a secondary nature, being merely an accompanying element to the image. Instagram, therefore, is a sort of a contemporary visual gallery that sets new standards for what an image or photography in the digital era should look like and how the subject and his/her social conditions should be represented. Being part of everyday culture and modern lifestyle, especially for younger generations or so called *digital natives*, Instagram has redefined what it means to *express thyself*, to belong to a specific community and to create a group or personal identity based on selected values.

Lev Manovich has identified this group of „native“ Instagram users as *Instagram class*²; mostly Gen Y and Gen Z population members that like to personalize their social media profiles and to make their identities visually perceivable. According to Manovich, these identities are no longer referring to larger social groups, but rather to very narrow niches of artistic tastes and cultural preferences. Since Manovich approaches the analysis of the image on Instagram as he would do with any other work of art, he notices how this new image recycles and re-combines elements from various artistic styles in order for an individual to create his/her own, personal, visual identity³. *Instagramism*, as he refers to this specific visual direction, corresponds to an accentuated demand imposed on contemporary image to define an individual and, in the end, homogenize profiles with similar interests and affections into virtual communities.

On the other hand, even though a bigger liberty for expressing individual traits and distancing oneself from a socially imposed group one by birth belongs to is given with platforms such as Instagram, users still seem to demonstrate what Bourdieu described as the need to associate themselves with a particular social class. In his book *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*⁴ he discusses photography as a social practice in which images structure identities and identities structure image production and

² Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, 72, http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/152-instagram-and-contemporary-image/instagram_book_manovich_2017.pdf, acc. March 4, 2020.

³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴ Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

interpretation. He refers to terms of *habitus* as a system of dispositions and *ethos* as implicit values associated with a particular group as relevant for understanding the practice of taking (and sharing) images in order to define belonging to a certain social group and materialize social status in a single image. These notions are affecting the style of images, poses, visual concepts and ideas. This implies that a certain tendency for class distinction yet exists in Instagram culture and that a matter of association with social groups is a relevant subject even in digital era of maximized liberty, individuality and personalization. Manovich himself refers to the Instagram class, but he emphasizes that he does not refer to it „in economic sense or to a hierarchy of groups in society based on wealth, education, prestige”⁵. This is the point I find crucial for my own research on this subject. Namely, in my view, on the contrary, images shared via Instagram *are* highly rich with class, economic and social division signifiers and, more importantly, offer visual and cultural codes intended to give visibility to only certain economic classes who replicate dominant ideological premises. Therefore, I directed my research towards the analysis of technological, cultural and social aspects of ideology behind Instagram image and the semiotic conditions it represents.

Before getting into this analysis, I want to take a moment to examine the complex relationship between technology, ideology and the individual (graphic 1). As in the case of any other product of human activity, technology is highly ideologically oriented in terms that it is created to suit ruling ideology’s needs, at the same time reflecting its basic values and norms. Technology has always been an extension of ideology, its hardware and software replica. As Wendy Chun states „software is a functional analogue to ideology“ and it „fulfils almost every definition of ideology we have, from ideology as a false consciousness to Althusser’s ideology as imaginary relations to their real conditions of existence“⁶. Today, it is a system that supports capitalism as a social structure of thought and existence and it is being continuously developed on a daily basis in the name of capital and profit. On the other side of this triangle stands the individual, the user and the creator of both the ideology and technology. In previous eras of technological and media evolution, individuals consumed the content marketed to them by an external instance. Being merely spectators and consumers, they passively adopted the cultural, social, political and ideological premises produced by the media, letting them shape their collective identities. In the era of Web 2.0, this situation has changed. The consumer is the creator at the same time, producing content daily, reproducing ideological values and helping establish new ones. This new individual – whom we can call *the new media author* – is the one deciding on the content he/she consumes, affecting it significantly and interacting with technology in a new way. Going back to technology as ideological extension, in this new scenario of individual as the new media author and his/her use of social media especially, it follows that the individual has great impact on the formation of technology and its content, reproducing ideology through it.

⁵ Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, 117.

⁶ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (London: MIT Press, 2011), 66.

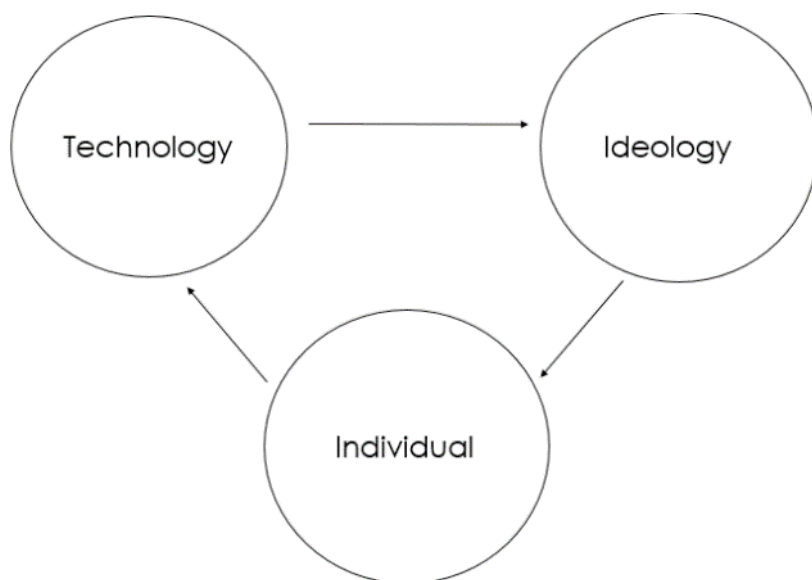


Figure 1: Relationship between technology, ideology and individuals ©Ana Vukčević

As Marshall McLuhan stated, „medium is the message“⁷, and so, in order to better understand the digital image, it is crucial to start from understanding the technological limitations and possibilities of the software and the interface that allow it to exist in the first place. The contemporary discourse is inscribed into the technology in a way that it naturalizes the idea of technology as a tool which does not condition the formulation of meaning, but merely transmits it. In fact, to a large degree, the complexity of technology conditions social media practices in a way that changes in social media technology are directly linked to the ways identity, social status, communities and the semiotic work itself are structured.⁸ As Geert Lovink stated in his paper *On the Social Media Ideology*, „treating social media as ideology means observing how it binds together media, culture, and identity into an ever-growing cultural performance of gender, lifestyle, fashion, brands, celebrity, and news from radio, television, magazines, and the web“.⁹ Instagram represents a new type of photography – mobile photography – which is, to a certain extent, dominated by the technological characteristics of the phone camera: it can be used to capture everyday moments and to create a sort of visual diary and to make *selfies* which, from a technological and social perspective, are a new phenomena in human history. Even though the concept isn't

⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 7.

⁸ Søren Vigild Poulsen, Gunhild Kvåle and Theo van Leeuwen, “Special issue: Social media as semiotic technology,” *Social Semiotics* 28 (2018): 593.

⁹ Greet Lovink, “On Social Media Ideology,” *E-flux* (September 2016), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67166/on-the-social-media-ideology/>, acc. June 13, 2020.

new and even though there are numerous artist in history who have been interested in reproducing their own self on the image or painting, the word *selfie* in modern language represents someone holding a camera/phone with their own hand, from a very limited number of perspectives possible due to physical restrictions and sticking to a set of socially imposed visual compositions and poses for their photography. Apart from that, Instagram is defined also by a set of filters that help create visual identities corresponding to Manovich's idea of *Instagramism* as a platform that is intertextual in terms of referring to different visual styles in order to create one's own identity. This platform also allows *stories* which are technically predetermined to be visible to other users only for 24 hours, and used by people as a sort of daily diary. Implicitly, through some unwritten social conditioning, stories tend to represent people's lifestyle, social and cultural affiliations and *Istagramise* their identities in a way to position them properly inside a 21st century digital socio-cultural context.

Using auto-ethnographic method, over the years of actively observing human activity and forms of expression on this social media platform, I have noticed how various ideological and cultural premises have acquired their iconographic manifestation in an image that confronts identity and society in order to produce new media subject. This specific visual language recreates myths that constitute modern society, establishing new forms of semantic relationships between a signifier and what it signifies depending on the set of cultural and social references it refers to. Following Barthes' *Mythologies*¹⁰ and his analysis of current social and cultural phenomena as myths that keep reoccurring in different forms to produce meaning, I believe the same approach can be used to decipher Instagram's image invisible social code that conditions the visible – iconography. As research¹¹ done by scientist from the Department of Computer Science at Arizona State University has shown, there are eight categories of images posted on Instagram that take up the most percentage on this side of virtual space. Images that display self-portraits and captured moments from spending time with friends dominate, followed by images of pets, fashion, gadget, food, outdoor activity. Even though this research covers themes of these images, it doesn't examine visual style by which these subjects are covered and its possible interpretations. Outdoor images often tend to represent someone's lifestyle choices and preferences, which in most cases correspond to middle or higher social and economic classes, opportunities or choices. Sailing with friends, going hiking on your favorite mountain or spending vacation on a seaside is a privileged choice that, in any case, do not apply to socially and economically marginalized classes. The same goes for other images representing which technology someone uses, what fashion style they prefer, where they like to have their lunch and what types of food they like to eat. All of these elements are signifiers of a certain social class that defines itself by consumeristic habits, which are the bearers of modern-day capitalism. The myth of the *Instagramaticallay* mediated, or

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 8.

¹¹ Yuheng Hu, Lydia Manikonda, and Subbarao Kambhampati, "What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types," in *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, ICWSM*, ed. Eytan Adar and Paul Resnick (Palo Alto, California: AAAI press, 2014), 595.

better, induced upper class, therefore, naturalized itself by making the meaning of the myth seem like a system of facts; the myth is read as a factual system, though it is only semiological. The power of upper class myth on Instagram is enabled by the fact that all the other (lower) classes want to borrow from it.¹² Bourgeois norms, as Barthes refers to them, are being perceived as obvious laws of one natural order; the more the bourgeoisie propagates them, the more naturalized they appear. They interpellate the whole of humanity in upper class ideology, even if it can experience it only on the level of the imaginary. By spreading its own myths through a specific catalogue of images, the bourgeoisie invites other social groups to identify with it and thus, with a certain feeling of unattainability, demonstrates its power.

The Instagram class gets mainly represented by profiles of so-called *influencers* who, by creating a certain narrative and an aura around their personas tell stories of beauty, aesthetics, art, design, lifestyle, often referring to mythical ideas, personalities and concept that appeared in culture throughout the time and creating new symbols. If we look at who are the most popular influencers of our time with the biggest numbers of followers and collaborations with international clients worldwide, we encounter profiles that personify ideas of strength, force, masculinity, power, worldwide success when it comes to the male audience (@leomessi, @cristiano) and its equivalents when it comes to female audience: luxury, beauty, fame, popularity, extravagance, sex appeal, all of which with the imposition of a completely new standard of beauty and desirability (@kendalljenner, @kyliejenner, @beyonce). These two prototypes based on gender difference refer to persistent myths of masculinity and femininity in our society, with a special emphasis on what it takes to be a desirable woman or man in capitalist society. The idea of a strong, masculine man cannot go without his story of success, money and power; the same as the idea of a beautiful woman doesn't create much appeal if it isn't related to the myth of free, independent, successful, sexually liberated women in the 21st century which takes advantage of the neoliberal system in which she is able to be or do whatever she wants to. These prototypes refer to the promises of how happiness and freedom imposed by the westernized culture should look, which in this case means to be successful, to be rich, to be popular, to live a luxurious lifestyle, to enjoy all the perks of consumerism and commodification – to live a privileged life. As it is available to only a small amount of people in the world, to the rest, this myth is a powerful myth of something unattainable, but at the same time imposed as an imperative and a climax to which one should strive.

Another way Instagram is using its imagery to create a distinction between classes is by food. Images of beautifully prepared, mostly exotic meals are popularized on this social media platform by hashtags such as #foodporn, #foodstagram, #yummy, #foodie and take up a large number of images Instagrammers consume. It is not merely a matter of food and interesting meals as such, but an idea that one has the time and the luxury to prepare it, or that one is able to go out dining in an expensive restaurant or that one is a *connoisseur* of exotic dishes. As Roland Barthes notes in *Mythologies*,

¹² Barthes, *Mythologies*, 210.

the lower classes man is preoccupied “by the problem of bread-winning”¹³. Members of the marginalized or economically and socially unprivileged classes who work hard to support themselves and their families are often “confined to concerns of procuring necessities and are therefore not seeking elevated flavors, colors, or other aesthetic factors”¹⁴. Instagrammers who are especially attracted by this myth of carelessness, luxury and divine tastes are seeking to recreate these images, even if they do not have social, cultural and economic background to back it up in order to “prove participation in the system of signs that creates pop-culture trends and to reinforce and perpetuate the self-image that the Instagrammer is attempting to digitally portray”¹⁵. In this process we encounter the manifestation of Baudrillard’s notion of *simulation* and the hyper-real that Instagram image at its core represents. As he described in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, this process of recreating someone else’s life conditions which do not align with the reality of a person recreating it “masks and prevents a basic reality (...) it bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum.”¹⁶

Understanding Instagram imagery as a sort of a performance of different lifestyles, it is safe to say that these lifestyles are the performativity of an idealized myth about successful, prosperous and refined individuals¹⁷ striving to reach ideals of a Western culture capitalism and, in a world of unprecedented social and economic gaps and differences, avoid being perceived in any other way but in the superlative in all fields of life. Having all this in mind, I believe it is safe to say that Instagram as a platform and its image tend to be elitist and pro-capitalist in its nature in which, in order to adhere to the visual code of *Instagramism*, one must possess or simulate the tools necessary to recreate the idea and representation of a higher social class and the lifestyle and cultural, social and artistic preferences that go with it. Visual style that, as Manovich said, helps define an individual and position him/her inside a certain social context, has become a tool to mark in an even more expressive way the difference between social and cultural status. Members of lower social classes, even if possessing the technology necessary to create and share their images, often do not possess the semiotic and cultural tools to present their reality and lifestyle in a way that would be suitable to the unwritten codes Instagram image imposes, as this image excludes from its language symbols and signs that stand as signifiers for anything that does not fit into the privileged group. Poverty, bad living conditions, diseases, politics and social conditions of third world or transitioning societies do not fit well together with

¹³ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴ Jenny L. Herman, “#EatingForTheInsta: A Semiotic Analysis of Digital Representations of Food on Instagram,” *Graduate Association for Food Studies* (November 11, 2017); <https://gradfoodstudies.org/2017/11/11/eating-for-the-insta/>, acc. June 10, 2020.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 173.

¹⁷ Patrick Ryan E. Chua, “Instagram: The Myth Making Platform,” bachelor dissertation, University of the Philippines Diliman, <https://iskwiki.upd.edu.ph/flipbook/viewer/?fb=2015-07816-Chua,-Pa#page-1>, acc. June 10, 2010.

images representing newest neoliberal achievements or consumerist culture products, because those are a reality only for a certain privileged part of the world. Instagram, as being one of the most popular and most used social platforms on a global level, gives visibility to some, implicitly denying it to the others, emphasizing power differences among social classes.

Instagram image represent a contemporary, 21st century summarized version of Bourdieu's key concepts: economic, cultural and social capital. *Economic* in a way that it demonstrates someone's financial and economic superiority by reproducing lifestyles that are not accessible to everyone; *cultural* by referring to a wide range of artistic tastes in order to define one's identity and mark a distance between social classes; and *social* by positioning oneself within a network of other individuals, establishing relationships. The Instagram class, or better, "elite" have transformed accumulated common cultural capital over time into cultural competence and, thus, dominance in the virtual world. Taste on Instagram classifies, and social subjects, classified by it, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the *Instagramatic* and *non-Instagramatic*, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed, their class affirmed or denied.

Going back to Graphic 1 mentioned earlier in the text composed of technology, ideology and the individual, relying on Althusser's *Ideology and State Ideological Apparatuses*¹⁸ and having in mind the hypothesis outlined above, I can conclude that, by creating content on Instagram and thus through it recreating basic ideological values and class distinctions, the individual becomes a new sort of ideological apparatus. He/she helps reproduce the ideology and its values and power relation structures by implementing them into the technology itself. This individual – or, as I called it, the *new media author* – is deeply rooted in capitalist and neo-liberal ideology and interpellates other to do so. His/her power is located in its performed unachievability which communicates with the collective subconscious making this new image seem like the common playground of desires.

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¹⁸ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso Books, 2014).

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