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THE INSTAGRAM EFFECT

Mobile photo apps aren't just playthings. They're a whole new way of seeing.



When the mobile app Instagram emerged just over a year ago, I didn't expect it to make a splash. Photo sharing is old hat (ask Flickr and Facebook), and social-media tools ... eh, they come and go. But Instagram didn't go: It exploded, amassing 12 million users who've posted 250 million pictures. Not bad for an app built by six people.

What's the allure? It's partly that Instagram made mobile photo sharing drop-dead easy. Plus, photos are the global lingua franca, so the app spread worldwide quickly.

But I think the main answer lies elsewhere. The real allure of Instagram was its photo "filters"—and the subsequent rise of filter culture. Filters help us see the world in a new way.

When Instagram launched, it offered 12 settings to augment users' photos in ways that produced lovely and often surprising results. You'd take a picture, put on the Lomo-fi filter, and boom—the popping colors made an otherwise drab party picture emotionally vibrant. Or the Hefe filter—my personal favorite—which boosts contrast while reducing saturation, uncovering subtle details I don't notice with my naked eye.

As I used the app more and more, something surprising happened: I became increasingly observant of the world around me.

Walking to the subway the other day, I spotted a backhoe parked on a corner and got curious—what could I do with *that*? Presto: Hefe helped me turn it into the dirty claw of a weary dragon. Later that day, a filtered snap of my living-room floor revealed how it secretly looks like the wood on a country barn.

In old analog cameras, many such filter "effects" were a chemical byproduct of the film, so photographers became expert at understanding the unique powers of each. Fujifilm's Velvia film, with its high saturation and strong contrast, attracts photographers looking to capture the vibrancy of nature, Instagram cofounder Kevin Systrom notes.

But casual photographers rarely developed this type of eye, because they just wanted to point and shoot. What Instagram is doing—along with the myriad other photo apps that have recently emerged—is giving newbies a way to develop deeper visual literacy.

"All Instagram did was take the creative tools that the pros have been using and put them in the hands of the masses," Systrom tells me.

The movement is growing rapidly, according to Lisa Bettany, code-signer of Camera+, a top-selling app for the iPhone. Six months ago, 60 percent of the photos taken with Camera+ were filtered. Today, it has risen to 70 percent.

Does this make people better photographers? Bettany thinks so: She gets letters from people saying the filters encouraged them to take their pictures more seriously and to be more daring. "There's all this food photography now," she says. "You're in a restaurant and you see people crouching down—they're going like, 'Oh, I need to get this angle right!'"

Critics sniff that filters are mere retro-chic nostalgia. That's partly true, but it misses the creative urge here—and how filters affect *what* gets photographed. Scroll randomly through Instagram feeds and you'll see the expected cat pictures and look-at-me headshots. But there are also tons of still lifes and landscapes, filtered into poetry: A vacant pair of blood-red subway seats that seem weirdly alarming, the corroded metal clock on an old oven as a meditation on time. When I was a kid in the '70s, you only got that sort of composition in *National Geographic*. Now it's omnipresent.

I find it a lovely moment. Today's tech is often blamed for producing a generation of people who stare at screens. But sometimes it opens up a new window on the world. [Email: clive@clivethompson.net](mailto:clive@clivethompson.net).