Enhancement or Distortion? From The Claude Glass to Instagram

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FROM THE CLAUDE GLASS TO INSTAGRAM
Robert Willim

In my eyes, and I imagine in the eyes of any photographer, artist or designer worth their salt, anyone posting a fake DOF [Depth of Field] Instagram photo looks like a poor, tasteless fool who needs to be shown the error of their ways. And unfortunately for the rest of us, they are so proud of their creations (of which they actually had no creative input besides pointing, clicking, and selecting a filter from a list), that they want to show them to the world at every possible opportunity. Hence the amount of irrelevant and inane photos on any social media site is now growing exponentially. Thankfully however, with the average short life-span of online fads, Instagram will most likely be forgotten and overshadowed by something equally horrendous in the next six months.

Escapetone 2012

It is easy to lower the tone of the picture by washing it over with gray or brown; and easy to see the effect of the landscape, when its colors are thus universally polluted with black, by using the black convex mirror, one of the most pestilent inventions for falsifying Nature and degrading art which was ever put into an artist's hand.

John Ruskin, quoted in Dupré 2005:28

The two quotes above were taken from texts separated by around 150 years. In both quotes, the authors dissociate themselves from relatively widely-used imaging technologies. The first rant was written on a blog administrated by a small design studio located in Boston. The criticised technologies were applications like Instagram, Hipstamatic, Snapseed, etc., which around 2010 gave users of smartphones, like the iPhone, the potential to swiftly apply preset filters and effects to their photos. The second text was written by the art critic and thinker, John Ruskin, in the 19th century. The technology he disdained was the Lorrain mirror (also called the Black mirror). The tinted mirror was used by artists and tourists to frame and visually represent landscape motifs according to picturesque aesthetic ideals. The Lorrain mirror is related to another device called the Claude glass, which was a small looking-glass that came in different colours.

The quotes represent broader debates and currents related to imaging technologies and mediation. I will use the quotes and the currents they represent as points of departure to primarily discuss practices of mediation. In the discussion, I will enlace a genealogical account of landscape representation, in which the word 'picturesque' will be important. The main point with this essay is to scrutinise the ways that visual media in some different historical contexts have been associated with either enhancement or distortion.

Instagram Aesthetics

Instagram was launched in October 2010. Central to the concept, with its instant, one-click filtering of photos, was the inclusion in a larger web of image sociality, where users could upload, share and comment on photos. The app, accompanied by the marketing pitch, "Fast, beautiful photosharing for your iPhone", was an imaging tool combined with a web-based social network. One of the founders, Kevin Systrom, stated that

> The idea was to make mobile photography fast, beautiful and fun. We learned from experience that taking photos on the phone didn't lead to the results that we wanted, so we created the filters and tools to achieve a more artistic experience (Systrom, quoted in Richmond 2011).

At the end of 2011, Instagram had almost 15 million users, sharing hundreds of millions of photos (Keath 2011; Van Grove 2011). The numbers kept growing. In early 2012, Facebook acquired Instagram for $1 billion (Rusli 2012). The filtering aesthetics so characteristic to Instagram were applied in other services. The photo editor, Snapseed, featuring a number of filters, was acquired by Google in 2012, and later the same year, Twitter included a number of photo filters in its interface, filters with names such as 'vintage' and 'gritty'.

Apps, services and products offering communications through social networks and digitally mediated sociality came in many guises. Several featured filtering effects for images. At the time Instagram was bought by Facebook, a product called Viddy was recognised as a budding 'Instagram for Video'. On the company's blog, it was stated that: "Viddy is a simple way for anyone to capture, beautify, and share amazing videos with the world". Filters similar to the ones that many users appreciated when using Instagram could now easily be applied to moving images. In the early 21st century, the visual aesthetics of filtering effects characterised by saturated colours or pale, washed-out imagery prevailed among millions of users in the social networks.

Through the Filter

Applications and tools like Instagram and the Lorrain mirror or the Claude glass were based on their abilities to transform and filter images or views. A filter (or digital effect) is a device for transformation and mediation. The digital apps were explicitly based on effects called filters that users could apply. Many of these offered transformations that either emulated the looks from earlier analog, lo-fi or toy cameras, like the Russian LOMO or the Chinese Holga.

> What used to be a quirky side-effect of cheap toy cameras, the so-called 'lo-fi' look, has become increasingly fashionable among digital photographers in the past couple of years. Amongst other things, 'lo-fi' images are characterised by over- or under- exposure, distortion, intense grain and low colour fidelity. Traditionally, in film cameras, these traits were caused by inexpensive plastic lenses, light leakage and colour and exposure changes created by creative or inexpert film processing (Smith 2011).

Some of the criticism against apps emulating lo-fi aesthetics and vintage looks were based on the argument that the filters distort and ruin the visual representation (Shankland 2011). The argument can be related to the complex issue of truthfulness and the realism of visual representation (*cf.* Crary 1992; Kemp 2006). It can also be related to questions on immediacy and the dreams of transparent media (Bolter and Grusin 2000).

Lorrain mirrors and Claude glasses were used mostly before the 20th century, but some artists were inspired by them in new genres of art, appreciating the filtering and altering effects of tinted glass. During the 20th century, artists like Gerhard Richter and François Perrodin made works with tinted glasses and mirrors, experimenting with the progressive loss of the image, devaluation and abstraction (Maillet 2004:187*ff.*). Some decades later, Matts Leiderstam used Claude glasses in his artistic examinations of landscape interpretation and seeing (Leiderstam 2006).

Filtering might distort perceptions and images, but often this distortion is the very aim of a work (Krapp 2011; *cf.* Boym). Applications of distortion are related to creative appreciations of noise, which might be seen as a comment on the quest for truthful mediated representations throughout history. Various noise-cancelling technologies have been developed in order to get rid of unwanted interference and distortion. But when is a visual effect experienced and defined as noise? Within photography, filters have been used to reduce or transform the visual input in cameras to create pictures with various qualities. Filters for colour correction, contrast enhancement, polarisation or various effects affect the image. To some extent, filters may reduce what is considered noise. But there is no clear-cut limit to define when a filter turns from being a noise reducer to an inducer of effects that might very well be experienced as noise. This ambiguity of filters often becomes a hot topic when new technologies or media are introduced to users, something that the quotes at the beginning of the essay illustrate.

Out in the Landscape

There have been extensive theoretical discussions and accounts around how to conceive landscapes within the social and cultural sciences and the arts (see Wylie 2007; DeLue and Elkins 2008; Ingold 2011). Landscape is often related to the concept 'environment', and consequently to 'ecology' and 'nature'. The question is of whether we can thoroughly understand the notion of landscape without scrutinising the uses and understandings of these concepts (Morton 2007; Thornes 2008). However, I haven't the space here to delve deeper into this dense conceptual and theoretical 'landscape' or 'ecology' (sorry for the pun) – I will stick mainly to the scopic notion of landscape, not because I find it analytically the best understanding of the concept at large, but because this notion is of most relevance to the discussion here.

The word 'landscape' can be etymologically traced to mediaeval descriptions of agrarian areas closely associated with the everyday practices of farmer communities. 'Landscape' was land shaped by human activities (Ingold 2011). During the 16th century, the word became linked to Dutch landscape painting, a tie that has strongly formed subsequent uses of the word. Landscape is since then often associated with painterly depiction and scopic practices.

> The equation of the shape of the land with its look – of the *scaped* with the *scopic* – has become firmly lodged in the vocabulary of modernist art history. Landscape has thus come to be identified with scenery and with an art of description that would see the world spread out on canvas, much as in the subsequent development of both cartography and photography, it would come to be projected onto a plate or a screen, or the pages of an atlas (Ingold 2011:126*f.*, italics in original).

In this sense, landscapes connote a distance, a subject-object relation where panoramic framings of wide expanses

can be turned into views by an onlooker. According to this understanding, landscapes are entities at a distance that can be enjoyed from a standpoint, preferably from a scenic overview. This notion makes landscape something you as an observer, artist or tourist can go out in. You are in the landscape but still looking at it. You come close, but it is still somewhat at a distance.

Picturesque Views

The scopic practices of the scenic overview have a chequered cultural history in Europe and North America. The enjoyment of landscape views has long been practiced. But during the 17th century, and after, notions of landscape and nature became charged with new values in Europe. The concepts became integrated in artistic practices and in gardening and architecture in novel ways. The landscape concept also became central for the growth of a new set of practices in the form of tourism.

Ideas about authentic experiences and representations are crucial for the understanding of both art and tourism. A concept that was applied in art and subsequently in tourism was the picturesque. To approach the world as if it were a picture first appeared in practices of painting and was then adopted in gardening as well as in tourism, but, since the 19th century, has been associated to a high degree with paltry aesthetic qualities and bad taste. John Macarthur writes about these shifting understandings when he scrutinises the history of the picturesque and how it has been related to notions of architecture, disgust and irregularities.

> Today, understanding experience through images is ubiquitous, and its accompanying technology so sophisticated that the term 'picturesque', which once meant a radical blurring of art and life, is frequently used as a synonym for aesthetic failure, trivial cultural products and naïve tastes (Macarthur 2007:1).

This shift can be related to a cultural dynamic of which Orvar Löfgren writes in his history of vacationing. He stresses that the world of tourism is characterised by "the tension between routinization and improvisation, between the predictable and the surprising, which produces a craving for fresh sights and novel experiences" (Löfgren 1999:26f.). The picturesque was a quality that was articulated in various ways. Macarthur stresses the understanding of "the picturesque as an ensemble of concepts and techniques" (Macarthur 2007:2). In relation to tourism and artistic practices in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, it was promoted in different ways in different national contexts. But there were also similarities in how it was articulated among a growing cadre of cosmopolitan, new elite tourists (Löfgren 1999:21). This early tourism was very much about establishing norms and genres of representation (*ibid.*:26).

> Learning the picturesque thus meant being able to locate landscapes with special qualities – it was the interplay of certain elements, shadow and light, foliage, irregular and varied landscape features that made a truly picturesque view. The picturesque motif often carried an air of nostalgia, epitomized in the idyllic rural life. Signs of decay, an old cottage, a ruin, a tombstone further stressed this atmosphere. Melancholy laments over the passing of time, as well as the insignificance of human beings became important parts of the picturesque sensibility (*ibid.*:20f).

The picturesque became part of a quite heterogeneous landscape aesthetic, but there are some recurring themes. When reading about 18th century tourists, the French-born painter Claude Lorrain often appears in the texts. He was active during the 17th century and was famous for his tranquil landscape motifs from the Italian countryside outside Rome.

The visual features of Lorrain's paintings, especially his treatments of light, became an aesthetic ideal among tourists and artists searching for the picturesque.

In order to charge experiences of landscape with aesthetic qualities reminiscent of Lorrain's paintings, tourists and painters started using optic devices called Claude glasses or Lorrain mirrors. This was the kind of device that John Ruskin criticised in the quote at the introduction of this text.

The devices came in a number of variations based on two major types. The first, the Lorrain mirror, was a slightly convex, tinted mirror. The other, the Claude glass, was a framed, transparent, coloured glass. By using glasses with various shades, shifting emotional registers or temporal variations could be evoked. A brownish tone could call forth a warm and mellow atmosphere, while a bluish glass could be associated with a nightly moonlit vista and so on. The conceptual similarities to some digital filters available centuries later are striking.

Through Glasses and Screens
We can today spot differences between the ways that different users have been approaching technologies like Instagram. Some are utterly negative towards these apps and devices; others find them funny to play around with; others consciously use them in creative practices, sometimes parallel with uses among photographers of more quality- and credibility-controlled equipment. Similar practices occurred in relation to Claude glasses and the picturesque (Löfgren 1999:27). The uses of media (new or old) might become part of routinised uses, but that doesn't mean that these are automatised and thoughtless practices. The use of newer filtering applications, as well as earlier uses of mirrors and glasses, is not the mechanical adoption of a technology. While many artists and tourists embraced the qualities of devices like the Claude glass, others despised them, and used "the derogatory label of Claudianism" (*ibid*.).

John Ruskin, who during the 19th century wrote extensively on art and architecture, was, as we have seen, explicitly critical of the Lorrain mirror. According to Macarthur, Ruskin advocated a kind of picturesque which was based on

> ... a concept of truth that can govern both moral and aesthetic considerations. He was thus drawn to the empiricism of the picturesque, and as a skilled and trained draughtsman and painter, believed that such truths grew out of artistic practice in the observation of the natural world (Macarthur 2007:14).

Ruskin's ideas about the value of artistic skill and the empiricism of the picturesque is probably one of the reasons why he was one of those who strongly rejected the use of any kind of "filtering effects", like Claude glasses and Lorrain mirrors. According to Ruskin, these devices contributed to "falsifying Nature", ruining and degrading art. Similar thoughts on the ways technologies and media ruin experiences or perceptions of the surrounding world are echoed through subsequent debates on tourism. Löfgren reflects on this:

> When the sightseeing bus cruises along we observe the vacation landscape through the smoke-colored Claude-glass of the panorama window. What is new, what is continuity since the days of Mr Plumptre? [James Plumptre was an English clergyman who wrote about his travels in the British Lake district at the end of the 18th century.] What does it mean to appropriate the landscape through the Claude-glass, through the sight of the camcorder, through the car window, or resting on a walking stick? Through intense reading of classical authors, romantic poetry, years of MTV-viewing, or leafing through package tour catalogs? (Löfgren 1999:96).

Today the practices of tourism and art are seldom connected, even if critique against some site-specific art has evoked associations to tourism-like practices (Kwon 2004). Here it might, however, be interesting to blur the borders between the worlds of art and tourism in order to focus on media use and notions of landscape. Ideas about, for example, authenticity are central to both art and tourism, opening up questions like: What equipment is required to get an authentic tourist experience? Or, what does it take to create good art? Which technologies and media are accepted in certain contexts but banned in others? What is a creative tool? When are technologies experienced as intrusive, when do they distort or enhance?

It might be fruitful to further scrutinise these questions and variations of this cultural dynamic, and how it is related to new digital media and technologies. In the cultural analysis of contemporary practices and processes, we can learn from earlier uses of and debates about technologies like the Claude glass and the Lorrain mirror.

Borrowed Features

Let's finally return to the quotes at the beginning of this essay. Why the strong words about "tasteless fools", "pollution" and tools "falsifying Nature and degrading art"? We have touched upon these issues by juxtaposing recent photo apps with tools like the Claude glass and ideas about the picturesque. The feelings expressed in relation to uses of media and imaging devices can also be related to a historically recurring theme of what could be called normative aesthetics. It is part of a defence of craftsmanship and ideas about professionalism. It is part and parcel of the social dynamics that occur when new technologies are introduced in various practices. When electric, then electronic and digital musical instruments were introduced, there were reactions against the loss of musical craftsmanship. Some writers still prefer mechanical typewriters, arguing that computer-based writing is numbing and dumbing. The same goes for imaging

technologies. This might be one attempt at understanding the irritation expressed at the beginning of this essay. But there is more to the story.

New tools encourage and strengthen some practices. New technologies are to some extent often prosthetic (McLuhan 1995). They offer new possibilities; they might enhance the abilities of the user, while they are also numbing or blocking some capacities (a simple example being a note book and calendar that enhance mnemonic practices while simultaneously numbing the memory.) It shifts knowledge in the head to knowledge in the world, as cognitive scientist and design thinker Donald A. Norman would have said (Norman 1998:54:*ff*.). This shift of knowledge (and skill) can be challenging.

There is a moral undercurrent that seems to run along much of the critique against uses of various technologies. The undercurrent is best illustrated by the fable about 'the bird in borrowed feathers', in which a bird (sometimes a crow or a jay) borrows finery from another species in order to impress. The beautiful bird is, however, revealed to be 'fake' and the borrowed (and sometimes its own) feathers are torn off. This moral stance seems to spur critics when they disdain uses of new technologies as "cheap gains" or as reliance on tools without having any real skill. I feel tempted to slightly tweak the fable to being about borrowed features.

This stance and related suspicions of dilettantism have also been challenged throughout art history in recurring boundary disputes on what is and what is not (good) art. These disputes have occurred in relation to both the Claude glass and the Lorrain mirror as well as to recent software photo filters. Looking at these debates and practices, we can note that the bird seems to have as many friends as enemies.

It is in this field of associations to various shades of skilfulness and dilettantism that the uses of both the Lorrain mirror and Instagram can be positioned. In order to further examine this, we need to know more about how imaging technologies and media are used in specific contexts. In

these examinations, the notions of borrowed features as well as ideas about when media are experienced as enhancing or distorting can be fruitful. ■

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