

Understanding the New Analogue Photography: Meanings, Methodologies and Aesthetics

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Article abstract

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Understanding the New Analogue Photography: Meanings, Methodologies and Aesthetics

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Abstract: This paper examines the resistance and revival of outmoded photographic technologies, in a new format we call “new analogue photography”. This type of image resignifies old analogue practices as stated by Ansel Adams (2019a, 2019b, 2018) in three key areas: 1. meaning, 2. methodology, and 3. aesthetics. It is the grain image adapted to the connected media ecosystem in post-photographic times. The contribution of millennials and gen Z to the growth of this type of photography is presented and discussed. At the conclusion, the decalogue of the new analogue photography is stated, summing up its practice and significance across ten topics.

Keywords: analogue photography, post-photography, hybridism, new media ecology.

Introduction

This paper investigates the resistance and revival of obsolete photography technologies, practiced now in a new format. The return of minor and major physical-chemical industry brands, such as Eastman Kodak, Polaroid Originals, Lomography, Fujifilm, Ilford, Foma, Kentmere, and AGFA – to mention a few –, is the commercial evidence of the current vintage resurgence. Meanwhile, independent initiatives such as collectives of film photographers, online forums on Facebook and Reddit, Instagram accounts and hashtags, TikTok profiles, and chemical laboratories that deliver digital images bridge the gap between old and new.

This trend may be referred to as “retrotopia” – the utopia of the past (Bauman, 2017). However, it is not limited to mere nostalgia. The “new analogue photography”, as stated in this work, is contextualized in the scope of “new new media”, as postulated by Paul Levinson (2012), and belongs to the thriving ecosystem of the New Media Ecology. In addition, it is subjected to the conditions of the post-photographic age (Fontcuberta, 2011), which will be investigated further in this article. The grain aesthetics occupies a space of resistance, in which photographers have used a costly and slow process in search of new meanings and aesthetics.

However, how does the new analogue photography exist inside the new media ecosystem? One step is fundamental: the scanning or digitization of films or copies. Within this stage, the image in silver grains frees itself from its physical supports to move freely in the data clouds. The transformation of grain into pixel allows the existence of a hybrid photograph: originally analogue, but inside the universe of bits. The “old” analogue image begins to adapt to a connected contemporaneity, marked by the transience between the roles of the photographer – simultaneously curator, collector, teacher, art historian and theorist (Fontcuberta, 2014, p.122).

If post-photography requires “a whole new set of conceptual tools to think about its meanings, uses and effects” (Oliveira, 2019, p.69), the new analogue photography also needs these instruments.

Considering Joan Fontcuberta post-photographic decalogue (2011), this work presents the decalogue of the new analogue photography. The list cover aspects related to: the nature of the final image and how it is consumed; the meaning and the symbolic related to physical supports; the main production methodology; the public that promotes this type of image; the compositional styles; the ludic and the return of the ritual to photography; the creative exploration of cameras and films, which can lead to collecting (another nostalgic and ludic aspect); the search for the unexpected and the imperfect; and the act of resistance in producing this type of photography, given the countless practical challenges of producing analogue photographs in the present day.

With the conclusion of the various stages of this study, it is expected to contribute to a theoretical gap identified in photography research, bringing a fresh look to the directions of analogue technologies. In view of the emotional and affective relationship of users who rescue artisanal methodologies, as well as new technical solutions adopted by photographers from the independent scene, it is expected that this work will contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda (Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations – UN), which proposes "an action plan for people, the planet and prosperity". The project fits particularly in the goals: 3, "health and well-being" and 9, "industry, innovation and infrastructure".

The grain in post-photographic times and Lomography pioneering

What is post-photography? In the beginning of his 2016 book *La furia de las imágenes*, Joan Fontcuberta provides a definition: "Post-photography refers to photography that flows in the hybrid space of digital sociability" (Fontcuberta, 2016, p.6). It can be captured by a variety of devices – from smartphones to surveillance cameras – and is the result of a visual superabundance.

Fontcuberta defines post-photography with a list of ten terms – or a decalogue – in his 2011 manifesto published in the newspaper *La Vanguardia*. Between the definitions, he hypothesizes that the circulation and management of the image will take precedence over its content; the photographic author now is in the data clouds; tensions between private and public have been overcome; and playful aspects of photography will receive more attention rather than a solemn and hegemonic art (Fontcuberta, 2011).

Andreia Oliveira (2016) also reflects on the role and the new methods of production, uses and meanings of this kind of photography:

The term post-photography appears somewhat obvious today, when photography and its practice have been so obviously transformed by computing and the World Wide Web. The screen is now the norm for viewing photographs, as digital transmission is already the dominant form of processing and distributing photographs. In this new environment, where photographic prints have become rare objects and photographs can instantly be seen worldwide, photography as we have known it since it was invented in the mid nineteenth century has changed beyond recognition (...). (Oliveira, 2019, p.69).

This excerpt from Oliveira helps comprehend photography today, as well as the new analog photography – the physical-chemical image adapted for connected environments. If in the "old

analogue photography” the copy was the third and final step in the photographic production, the screen is now the standard for consuming images. In fact, the analogue image in post-photography times abandons its physical supports (like copies, rare objects nowadays) to now transit in the data clouds. The issue of printed copies *versus* screen viewing will be discussed in more depth in the next section, concerning the differences between old and new analogue formats.

This work argues that Lomography was the pioneer of analogue photography in post-photographic times. However, what is Lomography? It is a brand of equipment and a photography movement that started in the 1990s, which brought playfulness and experimentalism to the old analogue photography:

'Lomography' is the name given to an increasingly popular trend in photography, which was initiated by several students from Vienna in 1992. Equipped with a simple Russian camera, basically an imitation of an older model of the Minox 35, 'Lomographers', as they call themselves, take vast amounts of pictures in all kinds of situations and positions, preferably without looking through the viewfinder. They usually have their films processed cheaply in supermarkets and exhibit their bizarre and often fuzzy prints by mounting them in gigantic photo-collages. (Albers & Nowak, p.101).

The Lomographic movement, started in 1992, was responsible for bringing the ludic, the unexpected and the lo-fi aesthetics to film photography. Using an old Soviet camera found in a pawnshop, the young Viennese students brought a digital mindset to analogue photography. Afterwards, the 10 Golden Rules were created in the summer of 1992, and the "Manifesto of Lomography" was published in the Vienna Journal on November 5 of the same year.

The 10 Golden Rules of a Lomographic photo brings film photography closer to everyday life, brings experimentalism and the search for the unexpected to photographs. The decalogue of Lomography include tilted angles, experimenting with the various types of available light (sun, night, various types of flashes), quick compositions, and not looking through the viewfinder when clicking:

1. Take your camera everywhere you go.
2. Use it any time – day and night.
3. Lomography is not an interference in your life, but part of it.
4. Try the shot from the hip.
5. Approach the objects of your Lomographic desire as close as possible.
6. Don't think.
7. Be fast.
8. You don't have to know beforehand what you captured on film.
9. Afterwards either.
10. Don't worry about any rules. (Lomography, 2018)

These rules contradict the tenets of traditional analogue photography. As an expensive technology, the tendency was to do the opposite of what each Lomographic rule mandates. For instance, cameras were primarily used for special and festive occasions, with careful consideration given to the film type/ISO and lighting conditions necessary for a good photograph. The photography was thought, planned, and the composition was crafted with high hopes for the outcome. Lomography alters this perspective, bringing a way of seeing closer to digital photography.

Thus, after Lomography and its golden rules, a new form of film photography was born: the new analogue photography. The Lomographic photos bridge the gap between traditional, “old”, and contemporary, “new”, analogue photography. What is considered old and new analog formats will be discussed in the following section.

Old versus new analogue photography

Firstly, what is understood in this paper as “old analog photography”? We may refer to the traditional three-step method of 1. photographing with a camera, 2. developing the film in a laboratory, 3. enlarging the developed film to create prints or copies. Ansel Adams elaborately described this methodology in his trilogy *The Camera*, *The Negative* and *The Copy* (2019a, 2019b, 2018). In a synthesis, the old film photography is guided by strict physical methodologies and supplies, like developed films in a red-light lab and printed copies inside a family album. The enlarging process – third step in Adam’s trilogy – is mandatory and defining of this type of analogue photography. The final expected result is a printed copy.

The new analogue photography, however, does not inhabit the shoeboxes. Instead, it lives inside the Instagram galleries, Lomography profiles, TikTok accounts and other niches inside the New Media Ecology. With the scanning or digitization of films or copies, the final expected outcome is a digital image. The grain becomes pixels – the new analogue photography can now circulate globally, whereas physical prints have a very limited and local distribution.

The new analogue photography is also a hybrid photography. It was forged by film emulsions and silver grains, but it now circulates in the dynamic world of pixels. It is originally analogue, but ultimately digital. This hybridization disproves numerous theoretical and empirical arguments that the digital platform will only condemn traditional technologies to extinction. In fact, the digital-analog hybridism brings many facilities for each platform.

In the new analogue photography, the digital technology brings 1. circulation, 2. knowledge (for the remaining physical-chemical processes) and 3. commercial attainability (for the materials and supplies that need to be purchased). The user/photographer can publish his images globally, research chemical steps for which he lacks knowledge on online forums, teach other users steps he is familiar with, and buy cameras and films on sites like eBay. This user can also send his unprocessed films to third-party labs, which will deliver the scanned photographs via data clouds. Therefore, digital offers numerous advantages to the analogue technique, in a hybrid movement of mutual benefit.

Curiously, the aesthetic of the new analogue photography relies on Adam’s trilogy *The Camera* and *The Negative* only. The enlargement process can be viewed as neglected or even ignored.

In summary, the final expected outcome for the “old” analogue photography is a printed copy, like stated in Ansel Adam’s trilogy of books. For the new practices however, the anticipated result is a digital file, circulating in social media.

Resignification: new meanings, methodologies, and aesthetics

When discussing the new analogue photography, it is possible to think of a resignification process of the old film photography. However, in which ways does this resignation take place? The three primary facets are: 1. meaning, 2. methodology, and 3. aesthetics.

In terms of meaning, the analogue process in photography can imbue an image with significance and a sense of belonging. The process occurs by slowing down the photographic technique, thereby introducing anticipation, wait, the tactile and the ludic of manipulating the camera and film. Occasionally, millennials use vintage cameras that once belonged to a loved one, which adds memories and affection to the photographic process. Consequently, the ritual adds meaning and nostalgia to the image.

The physical experience factor also adds significance to the new analogue photography. As stated by Levinson regarding the tactile experience, "physical places – even for words on pages – have not only aesthetic but enhanced practical appeal as a specialty in a disincarnate age." (Levinson, 1999, p. 154). In a binary age, vinyl, books, and film photography function as specialties and offer a distinct experience and aesthetic for the user.

On the second factor of resignification, methodology, numerous new practices have been developed. The most important of them is to convert grain into an image made of pixels. The scanning or digitization step can be performed with three distinct types of tools: 1. a common desktop scanner, 2. a dedicated photographic scanner or 3. a DSLR camera. The best result can be achieved with the second or third tools using the developed films only – the greatest amount of resolution and visual characteristics of the emulsion are maintained when digitizing films, instead of copies.

Other significant practices should be mentioned. In the pursuit of the unexpected and the aesthetics of the imperfect, the new analogue photographers employ some radical experimental techniques. The film soup, for example, entails dipping photographic film in substances such as alcohol, vinegar, and other acidic liquids. The damaged photographic emulsion can provide interesting visual effects such as altered colors and distorted/melted compositions. Another methodology is the "caffenol" process, which consists in the homemade creation of a developer made of coffee and a pH modifier. Traditional alternative processes are also performed, such as the cross process (development of a positive film as a negative and vice versa), cyanotype, pull/push the ISO of the film, among others.

Still discussing methodology, the process of expectation and silence that analogue can provide was said to be desired and associated with an experience of well-being. The slow, imperfect, and silent procedure provides comfort within a society that compels production. Therefore, the new analog photography is also defended as a practice of resistance to the burnout society (Han, 2015), in an era of disappearance of rituals (Han, 2020).

The aesthetic of the new analogue photography relies on Adams' trilogy *The Camera and The Negative* only – although Adams' rules are likely not known to the millennial public. The camera type (single-lens reflex, compact, instant, etc.) and the film brand & model (Kodak Colorplus, Ilford HP5+, Polaroid 600, for example) are the main pillars of the new analogue photography aesthetic. The enlargement process can be viewed as neglected. Types of photographic papers and their finish

(glossy, matte, pearl), for example, are secondary in contemporary lab practices.

The pursuit of an experimental aesthetic is also observable, with effects that digital cannot entirely provide. The desired visual effects include vignettes (provided by low-quality lenses), saturated or vanished colors, and grainy images. This aesthetic seeks to emphasize the physical nature of the original analogue image. It is the opposite of what happened in old analogue photography, where fine grain, color and contrast fidelity were sought after – think about the extinct Kodachrome and its impressive color/contrast reproduction.

The role of the millennials

In his extensive research on the return — or vengeance, as he calls it — of analogue technologies, David Sax has uncovered some keywords about this movement, especially when related to media and music industry. He highlights three terms: “authenticity, nostalgia, and *millennial*” (Sax, 2016, p.xii). In fact, millennials are the driving force behind the return of analogue – those who were born in the twilight of vinyl, paper, and photographic film. This generation has almost exclusively utilized digital formats to record their lives (Rayman, 2017, pp. 3-4).

This is an intriguing aspect of the return of analogue photography: it is practiced by those who lack a thorough understanding of the old technology and who view the physicochemical process as a means of achieving authenticity and a new aesthetic. The return is therefore not carried out primarily by photographers who practice the old analogue photography – those who seek fine-grained copies with the finest details and as much formal perfection as the film can offer.

Margadona & Andrade (2019) identified the following reasons for the use of analogue by young people: the pleasure and silence of the physical-chemical process, which is characterized by contemplation, surprises, and non-immediate results. It was also pointed the search for a visual aesthetic that the digital platform is not able to offer. Analog capture, especially if linked to experimental practices, is marked by spontaneity and randomness, which is in line with one of the precepts of post-photography: "more strength will be given to playful aspects at the expense of an art that made anhedonia (the solemn + the boring) its flag" (Fontcuberta, 2012, p.122).

This has generated aftereffects in the photographic film market. Fujifilm, along with Kodak, has brought back some of its classic films, like the black and white Fuji Acros 100 in 2019. The importance of the young public is clear: “the company credits millennials and generation Z consumers with the renewed interest in analog photography” (Roston, 2019). The innovations are not limited to Fujifilm alone: in 2017, Kodak reintroduces the classic positive film Ektachrome to the market and in 2019, Polaroid Corporation rebrands as Polaroid Originals and opens its first pop-up store in New York.

In this way, the search for analogue by the millennials and generation Z can be synthesized in a series of topics. Whether it's the romanticism and nostalgia typical of old technologies, whether it's fashion and trends (some influencers use analogue cameras, for example), curiosity, and the need to materialize the image in an imperfect and surprising way, this audience goes to great lengths to obtain an analogue photograph for a variety of reasons. “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 everchanging, hypercommodified world” (Olvera, 2019, p.4). In this way, it is also a way to achieve stability in an

unstable world that demands production and perfection.

Decalogue of the new analogue photography

How can we concisely and precisely summarize the characteristics of the new analogue photography? Following the same question as Fontcuberta (2011) in his post-photographic decalogue, how does this new kind of photography creation operate? Ten postulates express its methodologies, meanings, and aesthetics:

- 1- *On the nature of the image*: They are hybrid products, originally composed of silver grains and then converted into pixels. The final image is a file circulating on social media;
- 2- *On the horizon of meaning*: The material and physical aspect of the analogue image confers symbolic value to the visual products, along with nostalgia and a sense of personal attachment – “it’s special”;
- 3- *On methodology*: The visual production relies primarily on the use of camera, film, and a digitization device;
- 4- *On the public*: It is powered by millennials who seek authenticity, ritual, silence, and an aesthetic that digital cannot fully provide;
- 5- *On the ways of seeing*: Typical digital practices and compositional styles, such as selfies and more relaxed framing, are now executed with analogue cameras;
- 6- *About visualization*: Instead of physical copies, the image is viewed on screens. The hybrid image circulates on the internet with the same advantages and disadvantages of digital photography;
- 7- *In the experience of art*: Ludic aspects, such as the manipulation of the camera, brings playfulness, comfort and the ritual back to photography;
- 8- *In the experience of creating*: Pursuit of creative exploration of what each film and camera can offer aesthetically, which can lead to collecting. The collecting aspect provides not only new creative opportunities, but also a nostalgic and ludic element;
- 9- *The defect as an effect*: Not always is the fine-grained perfection sought after. Inclusion of the unforeseen, the imperfect, and the mistake in the photograph;
- 10- *In the politics of art*: It is practice of resistance, amid a high-cost market, which suffers oscillations and threats of breaks and rupture. It survives in an era of disappearance of rituals (Han, 2020), within a society that values productivity and perfection (Han, 2015).

This decalogue does not seek to exhaust the possibilities and characteristics of what we refer to as new analogue photography, but rather to shed light on its core methodological and aesthetical concepts.

Conclusions

What, in brief, is the new analogue photography? It is the film photography adapted to the connected, post-photographic media ecosystem. Compared to traditional physical-chemical practice, as stated by Ansel Adams (2019a, 2019b, 2018), it presents resignifications and innovations. This paper stated three key areas in which they occur: 1. meaning, 2. methodology, and 3. aesthetics.

This work also presented what we consider as the decalogue of the new analogue photography. The list covers methodological and symbolic aspects, identifies the public that promotes this type of image, discusses aesthetic aspects, and presents this type of photography as an act of resistance.

Thus, we believe that analog does not only return in a new guise. It is a new type of image, one that was forged in grain but is now subject to the issues of digital photography – as the disappearance amid countless digital records. Perhaps, this is part of a cyclical character observed within the New Media Ecology, with the return of old technologies, but now in symbiosis with digital media.

The next steps of this research consist of comparing the three works by Ansel Adams – the old analogue photography – with the new format. A technical and symbolic analysis will be conducted. Aspects of Fontcuberta post-photography will continue to be examined in order to contextualize and comprehend the new analog photography, at a time when images are proliferating at an alarming rate.

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