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Nosthetics: Instagram poetry and the convergence of digital media and literature

ABSTRACT

This article considers the proliferation of nostalgic aesthetics in Instagram poetry ('instapoetry'). Though often overlooked, the relationship between the platform and the poetry itself is a vibrant entry point into debates about the handwritten, analogue and vintage styles of instapoetry. Connecting modernist and postmodernist arguments about nostalgia, this article provides a critical and conceptual lens with which to analyse the visual aspects of nostalgic aesthetics – referred to as 'nosthetics' – characteristic of instapoetry, investigating how and why the genre impersonates the pre-digital, analogue past. Combining scholarship on platforms, nostalgia and instapoetry shows how the concept of nosthetics can be used as a framework for literary and visual analysis of instapoetry. The theoretical framework proposed recommends three developments for those researching nostalgic aesthetics in instapoetry. First, greater attention should be paid to the platform. Second, engagement with scholarship on popular culture and nostalgia is needed. Finally, it is insightful to return to the notion of space at the heart of Johannes Hofer's original definition of nostalgia.

KEYWORDS

Instagram
nostalgia
nostalgic aesthetics
platforms
social media
poetry
instapoetry
digital

Nostalgia is a beautiful lie
Dressed up in sepia.

(Atticus 2016b: n.pag.)

Although Instagram poetry ('instapoetry') proliferates in an age when much writing has been dematerialized and shuttered into cyberspace, its currency lies in its nostalgic sensibility for physical tangibility. Instapoetry is a neologism denoting a particular genre of poetry characterized by the instantaneity afforded by social media platforms like the photo and video-based app Instagram, the genre's primary mode of dissemination. Instagram, released in 2010, reports over one billion active accounts on the app each month globally (Clement 2019). *The New Republic* even named the young, Indian-born, Canadian Instagram poet ('instapoet') Rupi Kaur 'the writer of the decade' (Alam 2019), signifying major changes in popular literary culture: instapoetry has come of age. Kaur, the most renowned instapoet on the app, has millions of Instagram followers and has seen success inconceivable to most print-based poets: her first collection, *Milk and Honey*, has appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over three years. It has sold over five million copies and been translated into over thirty-five languages since its publication in 2014 (Andrews McMeel 2020). This once nascent, social media–made genre has reached the ripened stage of widespread recognition and devotion in contemporary popular culture.

But if instapoetry is the child of the digital communications revolution that we are currently living through, it is particularly odd how *nostalgic* the genre appears for the print cultures of poetry from old, pre-digital eras. And, if poetry is undergoing a renaissance, as several journalists have suggested (Hijazi 2018; Pitt 2019), it is certainly making its comeback '[d]ressed up in sepia' (Atticus 2016b: n.pag.). According to media scholar Katharina Niemeyer, displays of nostalgia are not uncommon and are a part of a wider 'nostalgia boom': the 'increase in expressions of nostalgia, and in nostalgic objects, media content and styles' (2014: 1). The trend belongs to the already existing commodification and aestheticization of nostalgia that accelerated 'in the last three decades of the twentieth century' (Grainge 2000: 27). Instapoetry, as will be shown, employs a plethora of aesthetic modalities that highlight a nostalgia for the materiality of poetry itself, as well as the physical and sensorial labour of creating art. As a record-breaking and global phenomenon, instapoetry warrants academic consideration equivalent to the attention shown to other expressions of nostalgia in popular culture in forms such as television shows, films and music videos.

Connecting modernist and postmodernist theories on nostalgia by influential theorists such as Fred Davis, Svetlana Boym and Frederic Jameson, this article establishes a potent critical lens with which to analyse the visual aspects of nostalgic aesthetics – referred to as 'nosthetics' – familiar in instapoetry, investigating how and why the genre tends to impersonate the pre-digital, analogue past – to a time when poetry seemed more real, more authentic. Buttressed by scholarship on nostalgia, platforms and instapoetry, two in-depth case studies on Kaur and Atticus reveal several levels of nostalgic activity occurring in the poetry. On the first level, instapoetry demonstrates a formal, modernist 'mood' of nostalgia through the proclivity of representing the pre-digital methods of creating literary works, for poetry as time-consuming, non-digital material labour. On the second level, however, the distinctly

melancholic qualities of the poetry do not indicate a nostalgia for another time, but another place: to take up space in the tangible world – to break free from the constraints of the screen where instapoetry resides, to be stored on the reader's coveted bookshelf rather than their mobile device. While the visual aspects of nostalgic aesthetics appear to be pastiches of analogue media from indeterminable, anachronistic time periods, as though exhibiting a post-modernist notion of nostalgia affirms 'a retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience' (Fisher 2014: 11–12), this article argues that nosthetics are in fact parody's opposite: rather than provoke laughter, nosthetics induce feelings of melancholia.

THE NOSTALGIA BOOM AND THE VISUAL ASPECTS OF NOSTALGIC AESTHETICS – OR, 'NOSTHETICS'

The nostalgia boom infiltrates various forms of media: from archives of social media posts hashtagged 'retro' or 'nostalgia' on digital photographs edited to appear like Polaroids, to advertising that glorifies the vintage fashion styles of the television show *Mad Men*, these examples and more pinpoint 'the part of the web […] where individual and collective nostalgias converge and spread' (Niemeyer 2014: 1). Hints of nostalgia can also be seen in 'revivals of past music, fashion, furniture, video games, food, drinks and other everyday objects' (Niemeyer 2014: 2). Davis, Boym and Jameson have long suggested that nostalgia is a surging and complex popular cultural phenomenon. While each of these theorists has approached the subject differently, their contributions have heralded a substantial body of rigorous scholarly inquiry into nostalgia and popular culture. Niemeyer is especially fascinated by the trend of 'using old-fashioned objects to represent new ones, even when the old objects are no longer necessary or relevant', such as apps for note-taking that imitate the appearance of ruled paper (2014: 1). Gil Bartholeyns, for instance, notices that the climax of digital cameras reaching optical perfection was, paradoxically, accompanied by the rise of 'photographic apps (as well as video apps, imitating Super 8 film and the silent movie era) which enable the analogue images of another age to be digitally produced and the photographs themselves to be presented as older than they are' (2014: 52). Consequently, instapoetry is not dissimilar: it exemplifies visual aspects of nostalgic aesthetics that further corroborate the consistent expression of analogue nostalgia in popular culture.

Despite its novelty and digitality, instapoetry is a genre that invokes nostalgia for obsolescent media and vintage aesthetics. Remnants of old, pre-digital objects and conventions that recur in the social media genre include visual aspects of nostalgic aesthetics such as handwriting and hand-drawn illustrations, calligraphy, vintage stationery, typewriters and mechanical typography. Moreover, digital editing tools, retro filters and distressing effects manipulate images to appear dusty, damaged or aged. Dominik Schrey refers to the nostalgia for outdated media as 'analogue nostalgia' (2014: 28) to denote what Elena Caoduro calls a 'fetish for cultural objects from the immediate past, and imitation of the style, design, and sound of analogue technologies' (2014: 71). Schrey calls analogue nostalgia a 'deep affection for outdated analogue media' (2014: 28). He argues it is 'the longing for what is assumed to be lost in the continuing process of digiti[z]ation that accounts for contemporary media culture's widespread romantici[z]ing and fetishi[z]ing of analogue media' (Schrey 2014: 28). Noteworthy instapoets such as Kaur and Atticus, among others such as K. Towne Jr. (2020: n.pag.), Tyler Knott Gregson (2020: n.pag.)

*Wine
is the poetry
I read on weekends.*

Figure 1: Handwriting, for example, is a familiar aesthetic modality of instapoetry, from The Truth about Magic *by Atticus. © 2019 by the author and reprinted by permission of St Martin's Publishing Group.*

and Lang Leav (2017: n.pag.), ardently demonstrate this trend of analogue nostalgia in their work (see Figure 1). Upon first glance, the proliferation of nostalgic aesthetics could be considered ironic, in a sense, as literature and digital platforms grow ever more convergent.

In reconsidering analogue nostalgia in the context of platforms, however, 'nosthetics' may be a stronger term for analysis. First, it is important to succinctly define what is meant by 'nosthetics': it is a neologism that denotes the visual aspects of nostalgic aesthetics, condensing nostalgic aesthetics into a simple term (i.e. a poem can use nosthetics). Further, the term also recognizes the widespread proliferation of nosthetics as a growing artistic phenomenon (i.e. a poem can be nosthetic in the same way that it can be beat or surrealist). But most important, nosthetic is almost a near-homophone for 'anaesthetic': a drug used to induce anaesthesia, the temporary loss of sensation, awareness and pain. The nosthetic poet maintains a degree of poignant self-awareness around pain and suffering, which contrasts Jameson's idea that the nostalgia mode encapsulates a postmodern condition of historical amnesia (1998: 20). A nosthetic poem is like an ailment alleviating undesirable symptoms of disembodied digital life. Because instapoetry deals with sad or traumatic themes, it differs from analogue nostalgia because the genre is not necessarily nostalgic for analogue mediums; rather, analogue mediums are used to express melancholia. As praxis, nosthetics conceptualize how these nostalgic images, poems and aesthetic practices convey melancholia. Nosthetics are not any one thing, but these slight slippages in meaning quite poignantly capture the convoluted essence of nostalgia at the heart of the term's ever-changing definition.

DEFINING NOSTALGIA: MODERNIST, POSTMODERNIST AND BEYOND

Coined in 1688 by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, nostalgia was diagnosed as a 'sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one's native land', or, homesickness ([1688] 1934: 381). The term is a neologism composed of two Greek words: '*Nosos*, return to the native land; the other, *Algos*, signifies suffering or grief' ([1688] 1934: 381, original emphasis). As Aaron Santesso outlines, however, nostalgia

no longer conveys anything as specific as a 'longing for home'. Rather, today, it is a 'catchall term for all forms of sentimental longing or regret […] more often imagined in temporal terms (one longs for the past) than in the spatial or geographical terms at the heart of Hofer's original definition'.

(Santesso 2006: 15)

Nostalgia now signifies an elusive mood or style popularized in cultural forms. Grainge notices 'two dominant tendencies at work in modern nostalgia critique, captured in the distinction between mood and mode' (2000: 28). Nostalgia operating as a *mood* fits more modernist theories of nostalgia, such as Davis' sociological study of nostalgia as 'a distinctive *form of consciousness*' (1979: 74, original emphasis). A nostalgic mood is 'a positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of some negative feeling toward present or impending circumstance', a subjective belief that things were better, healthier, more beautiful, civilized and exciting *then* than *now* (Davis 1979: 18). Boym argues that nostalgia is 'a symptom of our age, a historical emotion […] for the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete' (2001: xvi). She defines two distinct forms of nostalgia: 'the restorative and the reflective. Restorative nostalgia stresses nostos and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in algia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming', pacifying a desire to slow down, backtrack and resist progress (Boym 2001: xviii). Boym argues that nostalgia in popular culture is not restorative, as though longing for a place, but reflective: 'a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams […] a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress' (2001: xv). She believes that technological advances in the late twentieth century resulted in a popular culture obsessed with re-envisioning the past. Ultimately, 'progress didn't cure nostalgia but exacerbated it' (Boym 2001: xiv). Nostalgia indicates a yearning for slowness, or the comfort of recollection, distinctly opposing the age of rapid acceleration.

Boym's hypothesis about nostalgia – that it represents a desire to slow down and delay progress – contrasts with theories of nostalgia as a mode, outlined in Jameson's influential theories on postmodern culture and nostalgia. Grainge proposes that 'nostalgia as a culturally specific *mode* […] [is] less concerned with the basis and politics of nostalgic longing than with its stylistic form and significance' (2000: 28, original emphasis). Jameson argues pastiche is the dominant mode of postmodern culture, what he calls the 'nostalgia mode', defining the present moment as colonized by an anachronistic recuperation of other versions of the past that now constitute contemporary popular culture, and which begin to distance the present from us in time (1993: 21). Pastiche is defined as the intentional 'imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style' from the already established past (Jameson 1993: 17). Contemporary society 'seem[s] increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience' (Jameson 1993: 21). Having nowhere else to turn, 'we are now, in other words, in "intertextuality" as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic affect and as the operator of a new connotation of "pastness" and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history' (Jameson 1993: 20). The nostalgia mode is not a longing for the past but rather a 'culture of amnesia and historicist crisis' (Grainge 2000: 28). Pastiche does not long for a specific historical timeframe; it is not concerned with memory, but with displacing the present moment, leading to the past as

a transcendental signifier that fails to cement both the present and past, creating a sort of ongoing cultural amnesia that spirals continuously – unable to go forward, or backwards, neither ending nor developing.

Grainge advocates against the mood/mode binary, arguing that nostalgia can be addressed, all at once, 'as a feeling *and* a style, as a cultural emotion *and* a representational effect' (2000: 29, original emphasis). But even further, as Ekaterina Kalinina deftly argues,

> [o]ne of the most recent perspectives on nostalgia suggests that it is not just something one feels […] but that it is actually something one *does*. To *nostalgi[z]e* […] needs platforms; and one of the most gratifying platforms for nostalgi[z]ing is the media.
>
> (2016: 4, original emphasis)

Comprehending the rise of new platforms and digital cultural production requires thinking beyond definitions of nostalgia that oscillate between 'modernist (temporal and melancholic) and postmodernist (atemporal and celebratory)' (Kalinina 2016: 8). As Kalinina argues: 'the media are no longer simple triggers of nostalgia; rather, the media constitute the space wherein nostalgia happens and provide the tools for nostalgic creativity' (Kalinina 2016: 12). The progression of participatory popular culture on platforms has radically altered how the masses interact with nostalgia: it is no longer just an object of consumption, but the subject of cultural production, too.

THE PLATFORM: INSTAPOETRY AND THE VERNACULAR OF NOSTALGIA

Platforms, in the popular imagination, are often thought about as mere technological tools or social spaces that allow people to establish themselves and connect with an audience digitally (van Dijck et al. 2018: 10). But platforms are not irrelevant to the social dynamics they support: platforms are highly regulated, powerful systems that control, limit and sensor users and the flow of cultural production (Cotter and Reisdorf 2020: 748; Gillespie 2015: 1; Noble 2018: 13; van Dijck et al. 2018: 10). While scholars such as Seth Perlow and Lili Pâquet have pioneered research on the handwritten, analogue and vintage styles of instapoetry, there has been some misinterpretation or lack of consideration around Instagram. Perlow observes that instapoets 'ironically use Instagram to reassert the traditional notion that genuine poetic expression looks inky and papery – that a poet's work appears most authentic when not on an ephemeral, impersonal screen, but on the scribbly, insistently material [of] paper' (2019: para. 4). Yet this nostalgic sentiment is not necessarily ironic.

In their groundbreaking study, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin note that Instagram, in its earliest formation, swiftly established itself as a space of visual nostalgic culture (2020: 9). Retro filters, four-by-four dimensions and vintage iconography reminiscent of the Polaroid and Bell & Howell cameras all signified the app's fascination with the long-gone material past of analogue photography (see Figure 2).[1] Instagram provides users with an arsenal of built-in editing tools, filters and retro effects that make 'content seem like it was from the 1970s' (Leaver et al. 2020: 41). Instagram posts could therefore appear like 'photos from Polaroid cameras or lo-fi cameras like the Holga […] with washed-out colours, heavy vignetting, and even simulated physical artefacts like film borders and

scratches' (Leaver et al. 2020: 39). At the level of the platform, through its various features, tools and functions that generate nosthetics, Instagram manipulates cultural artefacts circulating on the app to appear analogue.

Figure 2: Instagram's second logo reminiscent of the Bell & Howell camera, 2011, Instagram. © tanuha2001/Shuttershock.com.

This influence that platforms have over cultural production is known as 'platform vernacular', a term recognizing how 'each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting "platform vernacular," or a popular (as in "of the people") genre of communication' (Gibbs et al. 2014: 257). By this logic, social media platforms generate new forms of expression: 'platform vernacular draws attention to how particular genres and stylistic conventions emerge *within* social networks and how – through the context and process of reading – registers of meaning and affect are produced' (Gibbs et al. 2014: 258, original emphasis). Hinging upon their observation, the saturation of nosthetics on the app suggests nostalgia itself is central to the platform vernacular of Instagram, given the ways in which the app implores the production of content that appears analogue.

Perlow questions why 'instead of exploring the innovative textual styles that computers make possible, such as animated text or unusual fonts, most Insta-poets deploy nostalgic visual tokens of literary refinement' (2019: para. 4). But he does not consider that Instagram could be the perfect environment for nostalgic aesthetics or nosthetics to flourish: it is not unusual for a platform with a vernacular of nostalgia to inspire other forms of nostalgic cultural production. Although Perlow acknowledges Instagram as a visual medium, he comments less on the platform's inherent ability to 'invoke nostalgia for obsolescent writing equipment' (2019: para. 15). Nosthetics are better understood as a symptom of the medium – as an expression of the platform vernacular – rather than a feature unique to instapoetry. The handwritten styles of instapoetry are in line with the wider web of nostalgic cultural production on Instagram as a media ecology in its own right (i.e. the platform already fosters an environment that circulates nosthetic images, videos and text).[2] As Marshall McLuhan taught us, in John M. Culkin's words, '[l]ife imitates art. We shape our tools and thereafter they shape us' (1967: 70, original emphasis).

Ultimately, Perlow suggests the handwritten styles of instapoetry are 'a vehicle of affectively intense, personally authentic expression' (2019: para. 13). Poetry is more than just text alone, but also the material inscription of ink to paper and the sense of intimacy and authenticity that generates. Pâquet critiques this veil of authenticity for being heavily constructed:

> [t]he use of old-fashioned technology, such as typewriters, contrasts the idea of the poets working solely online, adding depth to their brand. Ironically, however, the photographs of poetry are stylized and must be beautiful in order to earn likes and followers, and, in fact, the poet must curate a stylish and aesthetic page that skillfully combines image, text, and brand.
>
> (2019: 299)

Pâquet hypothesizes that 'nostalgia and vintage aesthetics contribute to a branding culture for Instagram poets', for they convey the impression that they are 'old-fashioned and romantic and that this romanticism is an appealing deviation to the focus on superficial physical attributes that is common to the rest of Instagram' (2019: 299). But the extent to which instapoetry is an anomaly from 'the rest' of Instagram is troubled by the fact that 'the rest' is too vast and sweeping to realistically measure.

There are billions of accounts on Instagram, 'so any single answer to the question "what is it" will be insufficient' because the app "is used in hundreds of different ways' by users all around the globe (Manovich 2017:11). Pâquet identifies Instagram as 'narcissistic through its focus on physical perfection, advertising, and selfies' (2019: 304), noting, particularly, 'the prevalence of selfies on the site' (2019: 297). As such, Pâquet concludes that instapoems represent a 'departure from the shallow norms of Instagram' (2019: 299). But an in-depth study revealed that less than 1 per cent of the approximately forty billion photos on Instagram are selfies: 'the selfie is in fact a niche phenomenon in the larger context of Instagram genres' (Caliandro and Graham 2020: 1). Leaver, Highfield and Abidin stress that 'there are many different cultural groups and practices deploying quite different norms, which is a long way from any singular notion of an all-encompassing Instagram culture' (2020: 173). Instagram does feature images that may be considered superficial, but by that same token, Instagram is a creative platform for visual artists such as painters, photographers, sculptors, architects and more. Instagram also includes activist accounts, tribute accounts, health accounts, spiritual accounts and an unending multiplicity of other subcultures that negate a reductive reading of Instagram as an inherently superficial medium. Of course, Instagram has standard user accounts, too, for regular people to share and like personal photographs of family and friends, pets, activities and the banality of everyday life.

NOSTHETICS AS PRAXIS: METHODOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

Perlow concludes that a 'more thorough survey of handwritten poetry on Instagram could reveal the emergent norms to which their work corresponds' (2019: para. 15). In response to Perlow's call for a more comprehensive analysis, this article recommends three specific interventions. First, it is imperative to prioritize platform analysis when dealing with instapoetry as part of Instagram's wider media ecology. Both Perlow and Pâquet remark that the

vintage styles of instapoetry indicate a sort of manufactured authenticity, but the assumption that instapoetry is a deviation from the rest of the platform is questioned by the scholarship on Instagram. Second, studies of the nosthetics of instapoetry must account for previous research on popular culture and nostalgia, for it provides a robust theoretical framework that contextualizes the innovation. Studies on the vintage styles of instapoetry focus on authenticity and marketing, but the rich body of scholarship of nostalgia reveals a deep, long-standing culture of nostalgia that hinders a simplistic reading of nostalgia as unique to instapoetry. This approach makes it possible to put all of these discourses in conversation with one another – platform studies, popular culture studies, literary studies, nostalgia studies – to return to the question of Instagram's platform vernacular as a catalyst for nosthetics in all of its many forms.

In light of these debates, a third intervention becomes clear: we must return to understanding nostalgia as yearning for a place. Some studies of nostalgia rush through Hofer's definition, focusing on temporality more than space. But the rise of platforms and the proliferation of nosthetic poetry suggests that nostalgia might be more connected to Hofer's original definition: yoking analogue artefacts into the digital sphere is, in a sense, a signifier that the poet, the producer of these artefacts, exists in the world beyond social media. Nosthetics are a yearning for a *place* off of the screen. It is a retreat from cyberspace back to the warm home and creature comforts of the sensorial world. Nosthetics that employ analogue artefacts from disparate time periods to express melancholia are not a pastiche; they are a yearning for *space* – the idea that things were better *there* than *here.* The internet is, of course, often discussed as a physical space: web*site*, the digital world, cyberspace. Discourses of digital citizenship reiterate the sense of belonging to an online society. Even 'platform' has a sense of physicality embedded within it: it is something you can stand on, a sturdy foundation. In 'The politics of "platforms"', Tarleton Gillespie stresses the etymology of 'platform', and emphasizes that '[t]he first definition in the OED and the oldest is architectural […] human-built or naturally formed physical structures' (2010: 349). Nosthetics can be seen as a will to disentangle from the World Wide Web, a desire to stay grounded in the solid, earthy realm. Nosthetics are not just an unfulfilled longing for yesterday; they are an attempted restoration of monuments, emblems and rituals that represent the physical world.

NOSTHETICS: RUPI KAUR

Kaur regularly flaunts the material life of her poetry, showcasing how she works offline. In a special series of posts uploaded to her Instagram profile, Kaur discloses, in detail, how she is writing, creating and illustrating her forthcoming third collection of poetry, *Home Body*. One clip features Kaur (2020a: n.pag.) holding a pencil; the camera follows her movements as she illustrates a rough sketch of a work in progress. In the caption, Kaur reveals that 'each illustration starts off as a rough sketch like this one. [I]t is then digitized and published' (2020a: n.pag.). The song 'Really Love', the lead single from the album *Black Messiah* by D'Angelo and The Vanguard, is heard faintly playing in the background, infusing the video with a narrative life that exists beyond the dimensions of what is pictured on the screen. The song itself is strikingly nostalgic sounding, with its string and bass instrumentals; it is worth mentioning that the 2014 album was recorded entirely in analogue by Russell

Elevado, a notable music producer who resists digital recording media. The emphasis on the non-digital aspects of her work highlights a nostalgic mood for analogue media that opposes the digitality of the platform.

Kaur, self-admittedly, is reluctant to adopt the latest digital technologies to produce her work. In another clip, Kaur (2020e: n.pag.) explains how she creates a poem from beginning to end. The caption reads:

> first i make a rough sketch of what comes to mind when i read the poem. then i illustrate the drawing on adobe illustrator using the track-pad on my laptop. yes i know there are better tools out there believe me i've tried allllll the fancy digital pens and hated the feeling cause i've been doing it this way since 2013 i think i gotta stick with it.
>
> (Kaur 2020e: n.pag.)

Time is fleeting, though at a slower pace than technology's turbulent advancement. The medium itself develops so quickly that it further obscures the present and produces a feeling of increased distance. The clip highlights the multimediality of the poetry, as it exists in both analogue and digital realms. Rather than use more advanced digital tools, Kaur illustrates directly onto the trackpad, which then propagates an image onto the computer screen – maintaining a keen level of sensorial activity despite the disassociation of the digital image.

In another post showcasing the material production of her forthcoming collection, Kaur (2020c: n.pag.) is pictured hanging and assessing possible book covers on the wall. A collage of analogue prototypes featuring hand-drawn calligraphy and watercolour-painted imagery draws attention to the amount of artistic, multidimensional effort involved in creating the book cover. The image appears grainy, flat even, mimicking film photography – unless it is, in fact, an actual print photograph that has been subsequently scanned and digitized. In the caption, Kaur writes:

> i saw the colours in my mind. i saw the font. and i sprinted out of bed to paint it. i've designed all my book covers but this one is special because the final is done all by hand. i painted it with watercolours and wrote with a brush marker.
>
> (2020c: n.pag.)

This post highlights the mode and mood of nostalgia that permeate Kaur's overarching nosthetic. Stylistically, the visual elements of the post blur contemporaneity. But in the caption, Kaur expresses a formal attachment to non-digital artistic creation. Unlike her previous book covers, which were initially illustrated on paper and then later onto a trackpad that propagated a pixelated image, *Home Body* employs strictly analogue methods. Kaur's feed exhibits more than just a reflective nostalgia, but also a restorative nostalgia insofar that Kaur attempts a reconstruction of analogue print-making practices: a return to materiality. As visual culture scholars Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain, 'not only images but imaging practices are used as primary modes of expression' (2018: 1). It is not the images alone that express nostalgia, but the entire series of scenes in which Kaur invites her audience to imagine the creative process behind the works they consume on a screen. Kaur closes her caption with a question: 'what do you *feel* when you see the cover?' (2020c: n.pag., emphasis added). This valorization of the works in their

pre-digital environment can be read as a reluctant cooperation with twenty-first-century technology as a means of sharing work and connecting with an audience.

The analogue nosthetic that saturates Kaur's feed is not necessarily replicated in Kaur's written work, though the material is strikingly melancholic. The poetry highlights a sort of nostalgia that expresses the appearance of melancholia in the Freudian sense: 'a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings' (Freud [1917] 2009: 244). Melancholia is a pathological state of unresolved mourning in regard 'to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on' (Freud [1917] 2009: 243). This sensibility can be seen in Kaur's poetry on trauma, pain, loss and displacement. In a poem that uses the title of the book, *Home Body*, as an epigraph, Kaur writes:

> after feeling disconnected for so long
> my mind and body are finally
> coming back to each other.
>
> (2020f: n.pag.)

The poem features abstract line art that frames the body of the text in a square shape. The square around the poem mirrors the four-by-four dimensions of the digital image itself: the poem is a box within a box. Or, that is, a poem trapped within an Instagram post. One might argue that the poem deliberately plays on the square as a digital space, the digital entrapment of Kaur and her poetry – the feeling of entrapment that having a split identity of instapoet (virtual) and poet (physical) might cause. In another poem, Kaur writes:

> it feels like i'm watching my life happen through
> a fuzzy television screen. i feel far away from this
> world. almost foreign in this body. as if every happy
> memory has been wiped clean from the bowl of my
> mind. i close my eyes and i can't remember what
> happy feels like. my chest collapses into my stomach
> knowing that i have to get up in the morning and
> pretend i'm not fading away all over again. i want
> to reach out and touch things. i want to feel them
> touch me back. i want to live. i want the vitality of
> my life back.
>
> (2020c: n.pag.)

In this case, the use of nosthetics can be seen as a balm for the harsh existence of everyday, contemporary digital life. Nosthetics allow Kaur to express her melancholia, underscoring how the sense of touch, as a physical feeling, and the state of feeling, as an emotion, are intertwined.

In the comments, one of Kaur's fans writes: '[w]hat you speak to is what I call dissociation […] my body's way of protecting me' (@thedancingmerganser 2020: n.pag.). Kaur responds with a resounding 'yess!!! i was also speaking to disassociation with this piece' (2020b: n.pag.). The rhetoric of disassociation, of feeling detached from one's self and the world around them, echoes media theorist Marshall McLuhan's conception of autoamputation. In 'The gadget

lover: Narcissus as narcosis', McLuhan discusses the Greek myth of Narcissus. As the old story goes, Narcissus fell in love with the vision of a handsome man mirrored in a pool of water; though he did not realize it at the time, the object of his devotion was, in fact, only his reflection – an extension of himself. Most interpretations of the Narcissus myth emphasize that Narcissus fell in love with his self-image, but as McLuhan points out, 'Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image' (2001: 45). The name 'Narcissus' comes from the Greek word *narcosis*, or numbness (McLuhan 2001: 45, original emphasis). McLuhan theorizes that Narcissus was benumbed by his reflection in the water because people, generally, 'become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves' (2001: 45). For McLuhan, technological tools are like Narcissus' reflection: extensions of ourselves. The presentation of one's self on social media, for instance, is an actual fragmented piece of the self, though nobody perceives it as such; they are *narcissistic*, in a sense, or numb to it. McLuhan calls these technological extensions of the self a process of suicidal autoamputation: Narcissus' 'image is a self-amputation or extension induced by irritating pressures. As counter-irritant, the image produces a generalized numbness or shock that declines recognition. Self-amputation forbids self-recognition' (2001: 47). The idea is that the more technology one uses, the more fragmented, or numb, their sense of self becomes, for it is too much on the central nervous system to bear feeling the anxiety of society's rapid technological acceleration. (McLuhan 2001: 48). The remedy is, thus, autoamputation – a visceral departure from the self.

Through his adaptation of the Narcissus myth, McLuhan demonstrates that technologically induced fragmentations of the self stimulate feelings of numbness as a self-defence mechanism. Nosthetics in Kaur's poetry echo the same sensation of numbness observed in McLuhan's theory of autoamputation. By saturating her work in nosthetics, Kaur attempts to incorporate the material world in which she exists beyond the screen, suggesting a sort of nostalgia that is closer to Hofer's original definition in spatial sense. It is not the past, perhaps, that Kaur's nosthetic poetry signifies a longing for, but for the raw materials that exist in the palpable part of the world: the sensorial experience of holding a pen, or for that peculiar emotional release that comes from crumpling up a terrible poem and throwing it at the trash bin in frustration. Or, perhaps, for the belated joy of salvaging the poem the next day upon the realization that it was not so bad, after all.

NOSTHETICS: ATTICUS

While Kaur has a more specific, less anachronistic nosthetic, Atticus' feed is a time capsule of random obsolescent media. A fellow *New York Times* bestseller with over one and a half million followers, Atticus is one of the most prominent poets on Instagram (Simon & Schuster 2020). Upon first glance, Atticus' Instagram profile appears to be a pastiche: previous traditions emanate through in an anachronistic fashion. Fountain pens and typewriters, cursive handwriting, dusty papers and monochrome filters provide an ambiance of a place that has aged. The time frame is indistinguishable, suggesting that any period before now, any generation before the digital era, is better than the present moment. Jameson believed that pastiche and parody are similar; the only difference is that '[pastiche] is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without

laughter […] [it is] blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour' (1998: 5). Nosthetics, like pastiche, include 'the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language' (Jameson 1998: 5). But nosthetics do not constitute blank parody. Like pastiche, nosthetics lack a sense of humour. Instead, nosthetics express feelings of sadness and melancholia, with an ulterior motive to instigate, if not tears, a teary-eyed sensibility. For Jameson, the practice of pastiche fuels the nostalgia mode's displacement of history and revolving circuit of blank cultural amnesia (1998: 7–10). Nosthetics, though they might also display this sense of anachronism, are not 'blank'. They are motivated to produce feelings of nostalgia for physical tangibility.

Atticus' feed mixes an eclectic range of images and objects that evoke an indeterminable historical period. Analogue media, style and design displace signifiers of his works' digitality and contemporaneity, preventing the possibility of identifying a distinct temporal period it seems to imitate. The sentimental, melancholic nature of his poetry, however, contrasts the idea of postmodern nostalgia as merely a style. Some of the clichés Atticus writes about include sadness, heartbreak and healing. For instance, in a poem captioned 'Broken', Atticus writes: 'I think there is something broken in our generation / there are so many sad eyes on happy faces' (2016a: n.pag.). Several hashtags adorn the post, including '#poetry #broken #love [and] #sad' (2016a: n.pag.). A pithy aphorism titled 'A Story of Modern Love' featured on Atticus' Instagram profile reads: 'Two people, both waiting to text first' (2020: n.pag.). A relationship in which neither person texts first certainly does not bode well for the lovers, or, for that matter, a love story (i.e. the story of modern love is that there is no modern love). Do not blame Atticus for the scarcity of good love stories these days – the culprit appears to be texting: short-form, digital communication that has replaced love letters and verbal conversations. The content is notably sentimental, and nosthetics operate as both a mood and a mode. But also, nosthetics conjure an air of nostalgia for a time before texting. 'A Story of Modern Love' is an undeniable product of the digital era, yet it uses nosthetics to express the message as a material paper note. The pithy observation expresses dissatisfaction with the present day and hearkens back to an ideal, utopian past before the age of electronic communication. The poem is nosthetic, for it uses nosthetics as a style and as a numbing agent to soothe anxieties that the rapid acceleration of technology is jeopardizing modern relationships. For Atticus, 'A Story of Modern Love' is one that perhaps cannot exist: short-form communication thus adequately sums up real anxieties that people have about modern relationships.

In another poem, Atticus (2019b: n.pag.) again constructs a larger, visual narrative that nostalgizes analogue writing technology and mechanical fonts reminiscent of another era. The poem is presented as a piece of paper still loaded in a typewriter, conjuring an imaginative scene that implies readers are viewing the poem from behind the eyes of the poet himself, just as he finishes writing and stares at his finished masterpiece. If not displayed on a screen but photographed, for example, on a Polaroid or analogue camera, one might believe that the image is an old poem written during another century. But as this poem ironically reads: 'We humans have / a limited patience / for reality' (Atticus 2019b: n.pag.). The juxtaposition of this apparent disapproval of the way things truly are with the analogue nosthetic perfectly illustrates how nosthetics can be used as a balm to cope with an undesired reality. The end goal in mind, it appears, is to transpose materiality from prior contexts into the

contemporary space of social media to affect readers emotionally – nosthetic devices result in practices of looking that are steeped in poetic tradition and old ways of looking, as if, like the poet, viewers are not reading through a screen.

This emphasis on gazing at the poem through the poet's eyes is a recurring theme in Atticus' work. In 'Darling', presumably displayed is the author's shadow peering over the left side of the frame, suggesting readers are looking at the poem through the poet's authentic gaze, as he hovers over the finished draft (Atticus 2019a: n.pag.). Arguably, and rather unromantically, the shadow is caused by the poet as he takes a photo on his iPhone. The photograph is heavily staged: light placement is strategic, and the note was, most likely, written many times over to achieve the picture-perfect version. Countless photos had to be taken, too, probably, to experiment with shadow placement, flash, angle, dimensions, position and more. Not to mention the filter: editing software has been used to apply a distressed, black-and-white overlay onto the digital image, concealing its original, technologically enabled true-to-life perfection. While the poem is short and implies minimal effort in actual writing, the staging and grooming of the photo introduce a new form of time-consuming labour involved in achieving the idealized constructed nosthetic that so heavily saturates Atticus' work.

The poem itself mirrors this material nosthetic. Atticus writes: 'Come on darling / she said / let's drink wine / and paint / our universe' (2019a: n.pag.). Painting, of course, is a physical activity that requires materials like canvases, brushes and paints. Indeed, the art of painting also conjures the notion of working with a range of colours – a stark contrast to Atticus' almost exclusively black, white and sepia nosthetic. The handwritten poem draws on the limited shades of white, grey and black reminiscent of monochrome photography rather than the full spectrum of colours that mobile photography affords. Reflecting further on Atticus' monochrome aesthetic, the choice to use black and white imbues the poem with a sense of timelessness, downplaying the work as a product of digital technology and insisting, rather, that it is a continuation of poetry that precedes the present moment. Grainge responds

> to the broader question of why a society requires certain images at particular times, the answer for black and white can perhaps be found in its basic capacity to arrest a sense of meaning, historical and otherwise: to simulate slowness in a climate of speed, to evoke time in a culture of space, to suggest authenticity in a world of simulation and pastiche.
>
> (1999: 384)

As if travelling back in time, 'black and white can give the present a temporal aura. If pastness pervades the visuality of black and white, it has the capacity to convey present *as* a past' (Grainge 1999: 384, original emphasis). The fantasy of existing in another temporal realm is an exemplar of a nostalgic longing for the more simplistic, slower days of the pre-digital age. But the black-and-white aesthetic undercuts the poem's wish to use colour – to paint the universe and break free from the constraints of black and white; that digital photography and modern technologies are capable of reproducing colour marks its absence as ironic. The black-and-white aesthetic, it appears, is not necessarily a nostalgia for obsolescent media and black-and-white photography, but rather a metaphorical tool of expression that conveys dissatisfaction with digital communication as monochrome in its own right by invoking the

feelings of melancholia associated with nostalgia. It is not colour this poem yearns for, but for the physical, material act of painting with colour. Indeed, to say that nosthetics merely express nostalgia as a longing for the past is too simplistic. Rather, at the heart of nosthetics visible across Atticus's profile is a desire to escape the constraints of digital spaces, to reach out and paint, or touch, the sky.

CONCLUSION

Avoiding describing instapoetry as a failure, as Frederic Jameson might suggest, it is worthwhile to conclude this article by drawing attention to his poignant observation that we have 'become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience' (1993: 9). In a rather pessimistic view, Jameson warns that popular culture exists in

> a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, speak through the masks and the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum […] it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past.
>
> (1993: 6)

While theorists have indeed begun to explore the ways in which instapoetry foregrounds visual aspects of nostalgic aesthetics, an in-depth exploration that prioritizes discourses of popular culture and nostalgia has been minimal. Lili Pâquet and Seth Perlow are right to question the vintage, retro and analogue styles of instapoetry, but it is insightful to view the convention as indicative of a wider cultural trend rather than aspects unique to the genre. If nostalgia is, as Pâquet maintains, material for human branding and marketing, it is worth investigating why it is such a powerful selling point further (2019: 299).

Future studies of nostalgic aesthetics in regard to instapoetry – or, for that matter, similar forms of creative expression on platforms – are well-advised to consider three specific shifts in critical perspective: first, platform analysis deserves special consideration because the assumption that nosthetics are unique to instapoetry and a deviation from the rest of the platform is debatable. Second, it is necessary to engage with theories of nostalgia that have been discussed at length by scholars such as Fred Davis, Svetlana Boym and Jameson to not only uncover the greater significance behind the nosthetics of instapoetry, but to build on their arguments in order to understand that the genre is, in fact, part of a larger nostalgia boom that is impacting all sorts of popular cultural forms. Third, a return to the heart of Johannes Hofer's definition of nostalgia in the spatial sense, to view the inherent connection between space and time as inextricable, might be better suited for understanding platforms and the online world as physically real, though impalpable places. A more nuanced approach that draws on research about nostalgia and platforms would provide an opportunity to study nosthetics as symptomatic of a larger cultural condition and anxiety surrounding the convergence of digital media and literature.

While many theorists of nostalgia and popular culture have treated algos as a longing, there has been an apparent turn away from the fact that the word inherently, etymologically means pain. At the root of nosthetics is a mysterious sense of melancholia – a wound within which lies a portal of discovery revealing a larger, underlying sense of uneasiness for the digital age. Nosthetics

might temporarily relieve this painful anxiety diagnosed in our contemporary culture, but they do not provide a cure. And while most scholars agree that nostalgia is a longing for another time, considering the significance of place can lead to new levels of understanding nostalgic activity in virtual spaces; contemporary studies of nostalgia should also discuss nostalgia as yearning for a place. Perhaps not in a geographical view, but in a physical sense – to understand the ways in which the spatial world allows us to *touch*, and how that makes us *feel*.

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