

'Buy Film Not Megapixel': Analogue Photography as a Practice of Technological Resistance in the Digital Age

Sergio Minniti / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract¹

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Over the course of the last decade, the simplistic view of technological change as a linear progress from 'old' analogue technologies to 'new' digital devices has been both theoretically and empirically challenged by the spreading of technologies and practices that illustrate how, within society, the 'old' and the 'new' are continuously and relationally produced.²

In the field of photography this phenomenon is exemplified, on the one hand by the diffusion of the so-called *digital retro photography*, i.e. the nostalgic remediation of the old technology by the new one enabled by the diffusion of digital applications reproducing the aesthetics of film photography, such as Instagram and Hipstamatic.³ On the other hand, a more complex, and less studied phenomenon of revitalisation of analogue technology in our contemporary digital environment has occurred in the field of aspirational amateurism, where an increasing number of photographers begun to reappropriate and use film cameras, with the aim of counteracting the 'dematerialization' process supposedly triggered by digital photography and reaffirming the value of photography as a physical, multisensory experience.

In this scenario, analogue photographic technologies, such as the 'toy' plastic cameras used by 'Lomographers'⁴ and the vintage Polaroid cameras privileged by 'Polaroiders',⁵ have become prominent actors in a bottom-up attempt to reinstate the authenticity of the 'analogue experience' in a digital world, and to 'resist' the ubiquitous adoption of digital technology.

This dissertation analyses the contemporary reappropriation of film photography within aspirational amateurism and focuses on the role played by analogue

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² Simone Natale, 'There Are No Old Media', *Journal of Communication*, 66.4 (2016), 585–603.

³ Gil Bartholeyns, 'The Instant Past: Nostalgia and Digital Retro Photography', in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, ed. by Katharina Niemayer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 51–69.

⁴ Bruna Mitchell de Morais Braga, 'Creative Possibilities of Analogue Photography: A Dialogue between the Past and the Present in the Era of Digital Images', paper presented at the VII World Congress on Communication and Arts, Vila Real, Portugal, 20-23 April 2014.

⁵ Sergio Minniti, 'Polaroid 2.0. Photo-Objects and Analogue Instant Photography in the Digital Age', *Tecnoscienza*, 7.1 (2016), 17–44.

cameras and their materiality in the configuration of three photographic practices: *lomography*, *polaroidism*, and *pinhole photography*. These practices are exemplary of a phenomenon that Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch defined as *technological resistance*,⁶ that is, a process of mutual construction of users and technology guided by a logic of opposition to mainstream technologies, which is often triggered by the obsolescence of technical artifacts.⁷ By adopting this perspective, the dissertation proposes to look at analogue photography as a present technology rather than a past one, and it reflects on how the analogue and the digital had co-constituted each other through a multi-dimensional (cultural, material, and performative) process of opposition.

The dissertation highlights how the articulation of contemporary 'resistant' photographic cultures, practices, and discourses has been grounded on the establishment of four dichotomies, on the basis of which analogue and digital photography are opposed: 1) materiality vs. immateriality; 2) unpredictability vs. control; 3) visual imperfection vs. visual perfection; and 4) photography as an intense and reflective experience vs. photography as an impulsive act. It concludes that these elements characterize contemporary analogue amateurism and culturally justify film enthusiasts' resistance to digital photography, as well as their seek for authenticity.

From a theoretical point of view, the dissertation adopts the STS-informed *integrative theory of practice* developed by Elizabeth Shove and her colleagues,⁸ according to which socio-technical practices can be understood as configurations of heterogeneous elements intertwined with one another and ascribable to three main dimensions: symbolic, material, and performative. This perspective is adopted in order to reconstruct the ways in which, in our contemporary digital environment, 'old' photographic technologies have acquired both a new meaning and a new social life, and how they have been transformed into 'resistant' tools allowing their users to reinstate the authenticity of the 'analogue experience'.

This dissertation is based on empirical data collected during a multi-sited ethnography⁹ conducted in Italy between 2014 and 2015. Fieldwork included the observation of activities organized by six different communities of photographers devoted to analogue photography, such as workshops, meetings, and exhibitions. It also included visits to specialized shops and private homes. Forty in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the communities were conducted, and over 1,000 photographs documenting practitioners' activities were also produced.

⁶ Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch, 'Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States', *Technology and Culture*, 37.4 (1996), 763–795.

⁷ See Christina Lindsay, 'From the Shadows: Users as Designers, Producers, Marketers, Distributors, and Technical Support', in *How Users Matter: The Co-construction of Users and Technology*, ed. by Nelly Oudshoorn and Trevor Pinch (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 29–50.

⁸ Elizabeth Shove, Matthew Watson, Martin Hand and Jack Ingram, *The Design of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

⁹ George E. Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995), 95–117.