

Wonderlands: Through the Traveling Lens

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Introduction

From the first photograph taken by Niépce which took eight hours to expose, to modern digital photographs which take less than a second to process, photography has continuously afforded us glimpses into the lives of the photographers. The capture of the light of those particular moments also captures, in a sense, the flashes of inspiration or the stirring of our hearts. We use photographs to communicate with one another sometimes the most complex and indescribable of emotions. Nowadays, cameras are so ubiquitous in American daily life that they have become another language, a visual one, by which we make meaning in our lives.

Whereas photography was initially limited to a very select group of people, now digital cameras have become inexpensive, easy to use, and accessible to everyone. As a result, photo taking has become such an integral part of our lives that we might not put much thought into each individual photograph we encounter or take. This is especially the case for travel photography, because people tend to take many pictures while traveling. Travel photo taking has become a part of our habitual actions.

But how might one define a “good” travel photo? Is it a photograph that commemorates the experience of traveling itself – the place the traveler went, the people who accompanied him, and the food he ate? Or is a good travel photo instead

the artistic composition – the originality, the beauty? Take these two photos below for example – can one be considered a better travel photograph than the other?



The one on the left might be a more interesting photograph, but it doesn't tell the viewer very much about the travel. This scene could be any aquarium, portrayed by anyone at any time. The first photograph reveals nothing. The photograph on the right, however, tells all. From this photograph one can tell the who, what, where, and even when about the travel, though it may not be particularly aesthetically pleasing. The one on the left may be interesting to a *wider* range of people, but the one on the right may be more deeply meaningful to the people depicted in the photo. Why did these two people take the photos in the first place? Theories surrounding the "Tourist" and his/her purpose are well developed.

MacCannell in his classic *The Tourist* said that the tourist is in search of authenticity of the "real life" outside their alienating modern work life (MacCannell 1976). Photography constitutes a part of the creation of a new "sacred" life of

modernity by replicating the sacred artifacts: buildings, places, statues, art, and other cultural elements that could be detached from their cultural contexts. These artifacts become incorporated into the reality of the Tourist in their travel. Neil Campbell echoed similar sentiments when he said, “the postmodern media surrounds us, ... with fragments, narratives and representations that as tourists we incorporate or reject as a sense of place is formed” (Campbell 199).

Thus people travel at least in part to see things with which they are already familiar, because “the pleasure is not seeing something different, but confirming that the [place] is the same as something already seen” (Couldry 61). Photography of such cultural artifacts not only elevates their sacred status in modern secular world, but also serves as hard evidence for the Tourist to show that he or she indeed experienced the authentic artifact. Claudia Bell expanded on this theory, saying “whatever tourists might see, they always require a picture of themselves as well: not as a mnemonic of what they looked like on that day (though years later they might giggle about ‘that awful jacket, that ridiculous haircut!’) but as evidence that yes indeed, ‘I was here’” (Bell and Lyall 141). In short, travelers (or perhaps more specifically tourists) may take pictures as an expression of modern piety.

Surprisingly, little empirical research has been conducted on the actual photographs. How might the results of a systematic analysis of travel photographs such as this one relate to the qualitative assertions made by these authors? What are some interesting patterns that might add to the current discussions about tourism and travel? With the ease of digital technology, taking photos has become

an extension of our subconscious, but an effective typology can shed some light on the theoretical frameworks discussed above.

In this project, travel photos were analyzed in order to find some connection between the underlying themes of travel and the way we as travelers record our adventures through photography. What elements distinguish one travel photograph from another? How much is this difference a result of the photographers themselves, and how much of the place or nature of travel? These were the sorts of questions considered going into this project.

Methodology

This study involved the creation of a typology and three stages of analysis. The typology was the analytical tool used for two of the three stages of analysis. The first stage involved analyzing 100 photos from each of a total of 10 individual albums. The second stage involved analyzing 50 photos from four tourist sites. The typology was not used in the last stage, which involved using the generalizations in stages 1 and 2 to make predictions about the character of a particular album from only one photo in the album. The last stage was to test the validity of these generalizations.

Through working together over a period of about a month, the researchers developed a typology to distill the important elements of each photograph and to quantify those differences as objectively as possible. The end product of these considerations was this chart below:

Content	Human		%				
			Traveler (#)				
			Full Body				
			Posed				
			Facing				
	Nonhuman	Artificial	Famous				
			Modern				
		Natural	Famous				
			Plant/Other				
Technique			Range				
			Angle				
			Exposure				
			Frame				
			Sky				

It is divided into two main sections – content and technique. The content section includes subheadings for the number of people, how much space they take up in the frame, whether or not they are facing or posed. It also contains a subheading for whether the content includes nature and/or artificial things, and whether they are famous or not.

The technique section includes subheadings for range, angle, exposure, framing, and sky. The ranges are medium, wide, and tight. Medium refers to a

picture taken from a medium sized distance. Wide angles are taken from further back, most commonly for long landscapes. Tight shots, in contrast, are taken from very small distances similar to close-ups.

Medium



Wide



Tight



Angles can be high, medium, or low. High angles refer to shots taken looking down, from above. Medium angles refer to shots taken on a more at a more or less horizontal angle. And low angles refer to shots taken looking up, from below.

High



Medium



Low



Exposure can be high, mid, or low. High refers to shots that are over exposed, or bright. Medium refers to well exposed shots. And low refers to shots that are under exposed, or dark.

High



Mid



Low | |



The final subheading, framing, was to note if the composition was exceptional in some way. We tried to assess how much thought went into the framing of the picture beyond just point and shoot. Pictures like this one on the left do not overtly indicate much artistic calculation, whereas pictures like the one on the right are clearly much more original.

Standard

Unstandard



The final part of our typology was a measure of the sky. Because the sky, though often beautiful, does not contain much information about the place of travel, we expected that different albums might differ significantly in the amount of sky in their framing.

After going through a sufficient number of photos together to ensure that the researchers were consistent with each other's decisions, the photo analysis was approached in three stages. In the first, different albums of particular trips were compared in their entirety. In the second stage, individual photos taken at various sites were compared. Finally, the generalizations made from these first two stages in the third stage were tested by using those generalizations to make predictions about an entire album based on one photo.

As many physical albums as possible were gathered in this experiment. The others were found online using an online photo sharing site. The results and analysis of each of the stages is presented in order as follows.

Results

Stage One

The data for this stage was taken from those ten different albums of different trips. The typology was applied to one hundred pictures from each album for one thousand pictures total. Before we go onto the analysis of stage one, it will be useful to first briefly describe each of the trips.



Trip 1: Yilin in Chicago



Yilin was studying abroad in Toronto, and took a trip for fun with the other exchange students for 4 days in Chicago. They rented a car so that they could freely explore the area.



Trip 2: Daria in Florida



Daria went to Florida for a week on a school break. She chose Florida in particular because she had a friend living there whom she wanted to visit.

Trip 3: The Ellis' in Japan



The Ellis' went on a ten day trip to Japan to visit their son while he was abroad last year. Mostly they just wanted to see what his life was like, but they also did plenty of sight seeing.

Trip 4: The Tsai's in Yosemite



The Tsai's went on a camping trip for leisure in Yosemite. They go hiking often, and chose Yosemite because it seemed like a challenge.

Trip 5: Liviu in Peru



Liviu was an astronomy major from Harvard who participated in an excavation at Tiwanaku in the summer of 2004. He considers himself a serious amateur photographer.



Trip 6: Akari in Peru

Akari was an archaeology major who studied abroad at Penn for one year, and participated in this same excavation. She is very interested in the cultures of the places she visits.



Trip 7: Brittany in San Diego

Brittany went on a trip to San Diego for two weeks, for both leisure and education. It was intended as an optional supplementation for an immersion French course she took in secondary school. So the places she went constitute a tour chosen for her and other students based on historical importance and educational values.



Trip 8: The Hu's in Italy

The Hu family went to Italy for two weeks. They were interested in famous historical landmarks that they had read about, and not so much in Italian culture.



Trip 9: Jonathan in Montserrat

Jonathan owns a house in Montserrat and takes trips there very frequently. This particular trip was 9 days. He likes it there because it has an old, quiet and safe feeling.



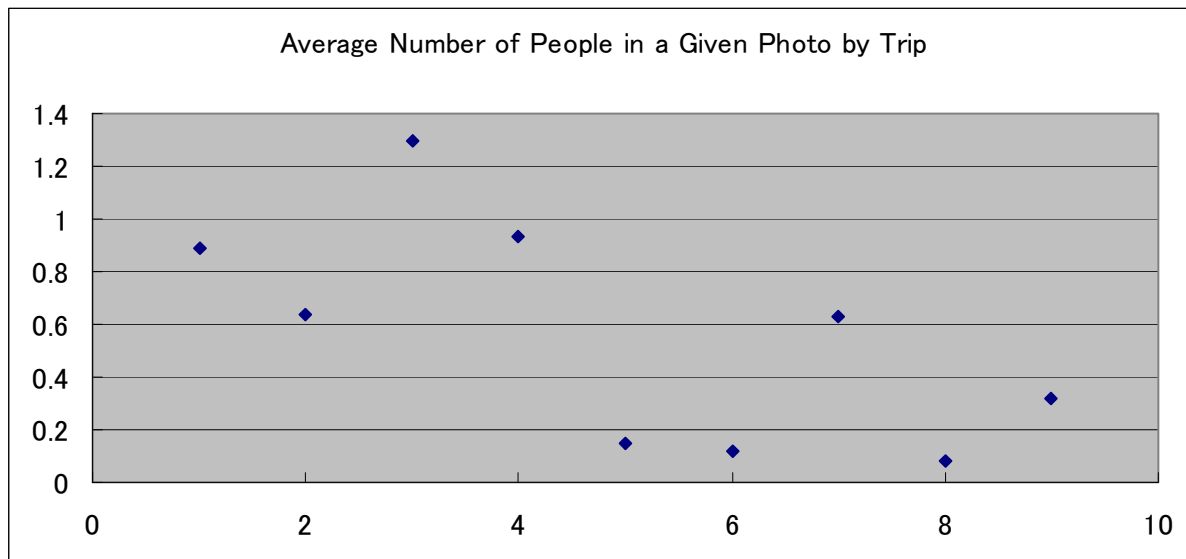
Trip 10: Adam in Peru



Finally, Adam went to Peru for one month to do some interviewing for a book he is writing on peasants and alternative economies.

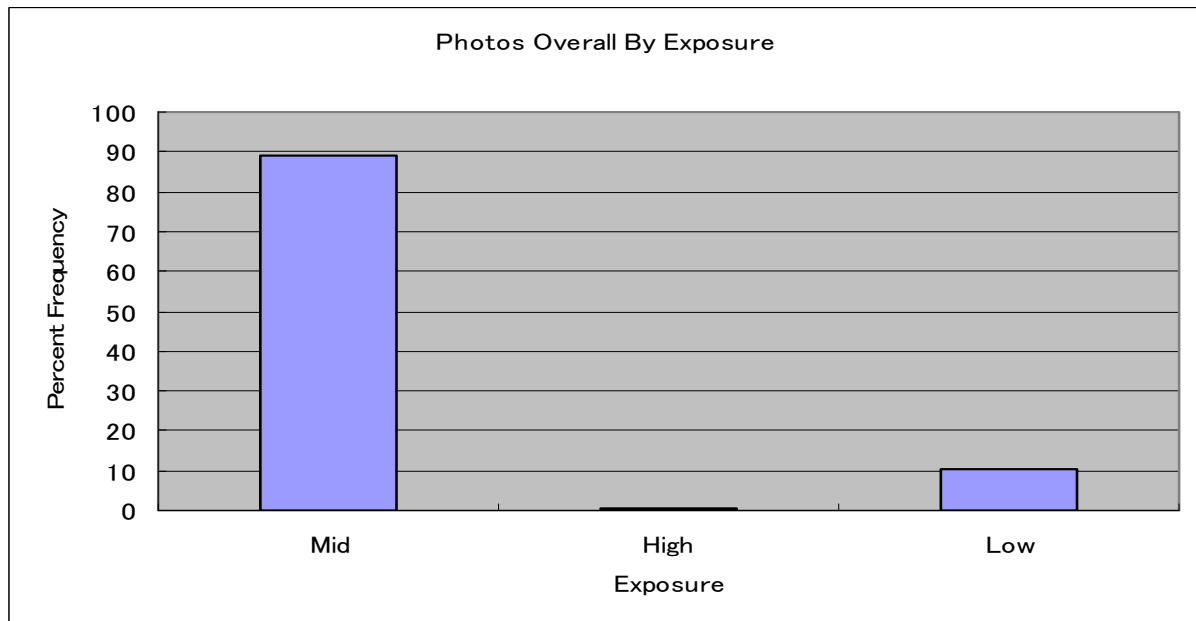
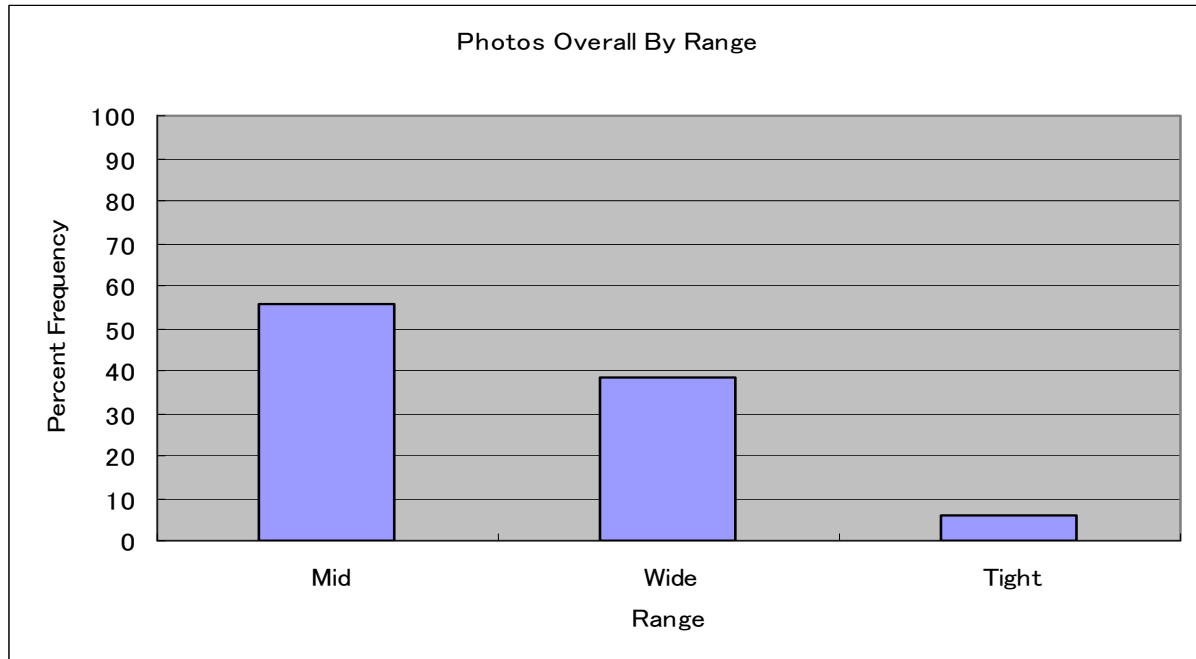
The data analysis for stage one was approached by first averaging the numbers for each factor in the typology to determine the overall trend for each of these factors, and then by taking a closer look at any albums that may have exhibited divergence from these trends. These findings will be presented factor by factor.

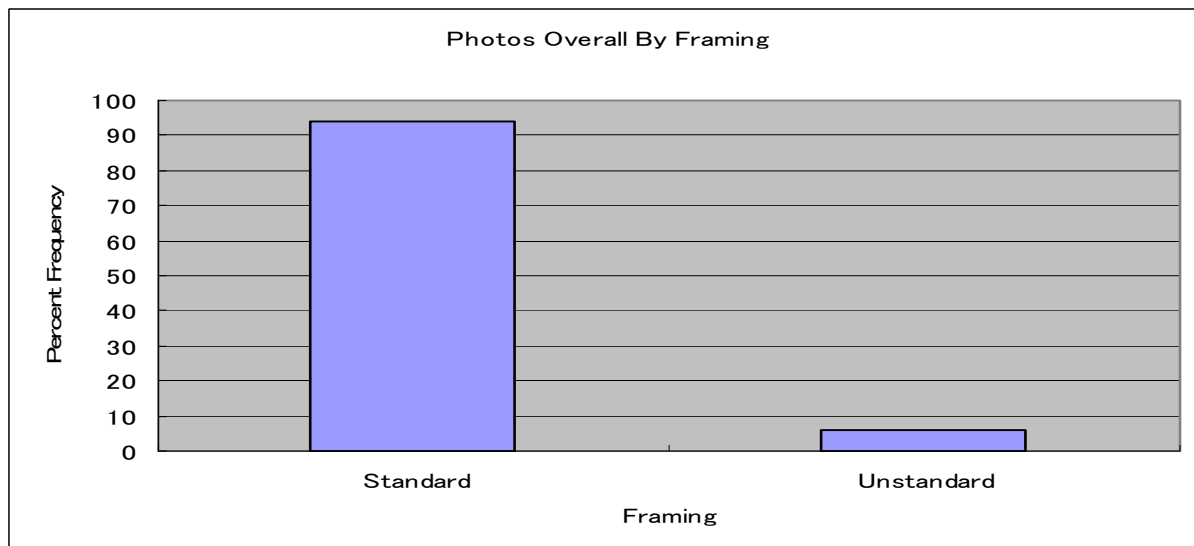
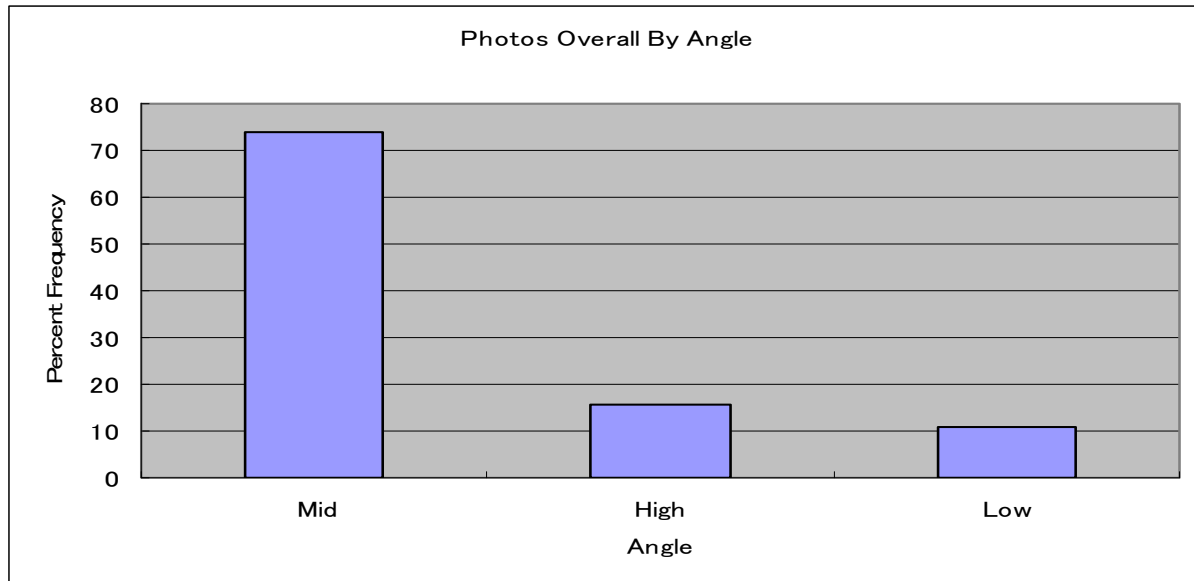
People took up, on average, 10% of the frame for a given shot, with .7 people in each photo (or about two people in every three photos). 42% of the shots of the travelers themselves were full body shots, 61% were posed, and 70% were facing the camera. However the standard deviation for each of these numbers was very high, indicating that there was much variation, whether caused by individual differences or differences in the trips themselves. This graph below shows where each of the subjects from the first stage placed in the average number of people in their photos.



Granted there are a couple in the middle, but note that most of the subjects were either very low (close to zero people per shot) or rather high (close to one person per shot). This suggests that presence of people in photos is an individual factor. This theory will be investigated further in stage two.

The next graphs show the results for the technical factors.





Most pictures were taken at medium range, though there was a significant number of wide range shots, and relatively few tight shots. As for angle, the vast majority of photos were taken at mid angles, with about equal numbers of high and low shots. In the case of exposure, almost 90% of shots were well exposed, with the rest being under exposed and almost no over exposed. These numbers showed much less variation than the other factors we've looked at so far, indicating that there is

not much personal variation. These patterns should be kept in mind for the site-specific analysis in stage two.

The next factor examined was the framing of a photo, whether it was standard or not. 94% of the photos were classified as standard, and only 6% as artistic in some way. These values were more or less consistent throughout all the photographers – the highest unstandard portion being Liviu at 14%. Again, to determine how much of this is a result of the individual photographer, and how much is a factor of the place, it will be necessary to compare these results to those of stage two.

The final variable looked at for stage one was the sky. One of the most interesting patterns is that some of the traveler's photos approach the golden ratio in terms of how much the sky takes up. The golden ratio is about 38%. It is found in nature and appeals to an intuitive human sense of beauty. Our inner ear is proportioned with the golden ratio. Three of the travelers, Jon, Brittany, and Liviu had sky percentages very close to this ratio, with 39, 38, and 36% respectively. Akari followed close behind with 34%. What could account for this?

First of all, all four took many pictures of places with natural beauty, especially landscapes. Jon and Brittany took standard photos, averaging 99 and 92% respectively, while Liviu and Akari took less standard photos, both averaging 86%. However, Ellis, the Tsais, and the Hus also took places known for their natural beauty, but had percentages that came nowhere near the golden ratio: 14.6, 17.3, and 17.1% respectively. The factor that they have in common is age. They are

all much older than the first cohort that took photos averaging the golden ratio. A possible reason for the distinction is that the older cohort had much more definite and specific purposes in traveling than the younger cohort. The younger cohort was much more open to all types of experience, even experience that did not relate to them directly, such as daily life photos. The older cohort deviated much more from the mean than the younger cohort, showing definite purpose. Golden ratio photos are often taken subconsciously, as an afterthought, whereas the photos with extremes show purpose.

The younger cohort's albums, with the exception of Daria's, had more internal variation between photos than the older cohort. The album with the most internal variation in terms of photo taking technique and composition was Liviu's. This is consistent with the analysis of the ratio of sky above because Daria had a definite purpose and place: Disneyworld. Liviu, Akari, and Yilin all had "exploration" as part of their purpose, explicitly or implicitly. This openness to the places they visited also led to a wider variety of photos taken. On the other hand, when "exploration" was not present in the purpose of the trip, the variety of photos was much narrower. For example, even though the Hus wanted to experience Italy, they already had a very carefully planned itinerary, knowing pretty well what they were going to see and what kinds of photos should be taken. Jon's album was notable for its extremely low percentage of humans in photos. Because Jon owns a house in the place he took photos, putting human subjects in the landscape was not

necessary. The photos of the landscapes had very little variation, as if he had a mental template.

The results of stage one's album-specific analysis made it possible to develop some generalizations on the role of the traveler in travel photography. The site-specific analysis in stage two will try to determine the role of the travel itself.

Stage Two

In stage one, several albums taken by a several individuals were examined at length. In this next stage, the focus shifted to individuals photos of four different sites (50 for each site), taken from a variety of different albums. The four sites chosen were the Buddha of Kamakura, the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, the Bean of Chicago, and Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia.

The Buddha



Liberty Bell



Chicago Bean



Salar de Uyuni



By comparing the results found from applying the same typology in stage two to those found stage one, the goal was to determine what aspects of photo taking were dictated more by individual idiosyncrasies, and what aspects were more a result of the place. Again, the results and analysis will be listed factor by factor.

Every site exhibited higher number of travelers per shot than the average found in stage one – the Liberty Bell and Uyuni were especially high. This may be because these sites are all very famous – so travelers felt more compelled to include themselves in the shots. However, the deviations between these cases were relatively small. Between the sites, people varied much more in their inclusion of the travelers in a photo, suggesting this variable is more a factor of individual differences than differences of the site. The deviations in stage one was much more than stage two, also suggesting a good deal of human agency in the types of photos people take.

In the case of the technical variables, exposure never differed significantly from the pattern found in stage one. By and large, travelers seem to take well-exposed photos. However, analysis of the other factors produced some interesting

results. The Buddha and the Liberty Bell showed more mid range and mid angle shots than the mean and the Chicago Bean and Salar. In other words, there seemed to be much more experimentation in the latter two sites in terms of different ranges and angles. This may have something to do with the nature of these two different sets of sites. The Buddha and especially the Liberty Bell are set up in ways that confine the travel photographer from experimenting, whereas the Bean and Salar are much more open and free.

This theory is further supported by analysis of the standardness of the framing – shots of the Buddha and Liberty Bell did not deviate significantly from the average found in stage one, whereas the shots of the bean and especially Salar showed much higher rates of artistic framing.

In the sky variable, the Buddha and the Liberty Bell exhibited less sky than the mean, whereas the bean did not differ significantly. Salar, however, was the highest at 41%, making it the closest to the golden ratio. Perhaps this is because it was the most open of the sites, allowing for the most creativity. Furthermore, the Buddha and especially the Liberty Bell are very iconic sites, and have been as long as photography has existed. Maybe the travelers had already obtained an idealized sense of what types of photos to take at these sites from other representations they had seen, as opposed to the Bean and Salar which have only become popular much more recently. The limitations of photographic technology in the past, for example the necessity of standing still and holding a pose, may have left a cultural residue in the way people take photos at sites that have been iconic for as long as photography

existed. The newer sites became popular after the advent of digital photography, which created more varied collective images, which in turn encouraged more variety. This relates back to Campbell's belief that we are surrounded by fragments and representations that, as tourists, we incorporate or reject to form a sense of place. Whatever the reason, these results clearly show that the particular travel sites play a large role in what kind of photographs travelers take.

Now that some generalizations have been established, it is time to test their validity in stage three.

Stage Three

Stage three is a little different from the other two stages in that the typology was largely abandoned in order to focus on specific factors for a group of photos. Based on the cover photo of an album on the website, the researchers tried to make generalization about the album as a whole – Did this person take lots of photos with people? Did they take mostly standard or non-standard shots? Would the percentage of sky be more or less than the average? If more, is it close to the golden mean?

This photo below, for example, was one of the cover photos about which generalizations were made.



Based on this unstandardly framed photo, one might believe that the album contains many other non-standard shots. These types of shots were much less common in general, but that individuals did show variation, meaning someone who took one non-standard shot might be likely to take others. Indeed, this album had a high number of meticulously composed shots, with a rate of 65% - well above the mean of 6%.



Guesses such as this one were made for several of albums for each of three main factors – standardness, presence of people, and percentage of sky. The guesses were quite successful with respect to standardness and presence people, getting most correct and one or two only marginally correct. Sky, however, was no better than chance – with a 50% correct guess rate, indicating that though often useful, some of the generalizations made in this study require more research to explain more thoroughly.

Discussion

As much as one would like to think that there is the “quintessential” travel photo, this study has showed that between individuals, the deviations are so high that the “quintessential” travel photo does not exist. There may be a common way of taking a photo at a particular site, but no common way to take photos among individuals. Just as we would like to think that a “Roman” nose characterizes a “classic” Italian, in reality, most Italians do not have this “Roman” nose. Our perception tricks our mind by taking a striking characteristic and using that to define a group. In the case of travel photos, the striking characteristic of having a posed, facing person standing in front of or to the side of a famous monument may not even be the majority of travel photos taken. In stage one and two, most of the photos did not even have the travelers in it. When the photos did have the travelers in it, nearly 40 percent were unposed.

What the golden ratio and the internal deviations can show us has also been a surprise even for the researchers. The fact that certain patterns between purpose and the types of photos taken exist indicates that this type of research can be carried out by others using similar typologies. The ability to start from the photo without any other information and to be able to make educated guesses about the nature of the set of photos shows that the typology can be a useful tool in the analysis of photos and their photographers. It can contribute greatly to fields such as photography, visual anthropology, and even linguistics. In this study it was observed that there might be a possible connection between the tourist history of a site (i.e. how photos were taken previously) and the types of photos taken now. This can reflect how ideas are passed through different generations and between different sets of people.

In applying the typology to these different sets of travel photos, it was possible to develop some useful generalizations on why travelers take the kinds of photos they do. The presence of the travelers in their own shots, for example, was largely an individual difference – some people included many such shots, whereas others included none. Other factors, like standardness of the framing, were more likely the result of the nature of the sites of the travel themselves. There were still other factors for which useful generalizations were not possible to develop – for example the nature of the content of the shot, whether it is modern or ancient, famous or not. The presence of sky also proved to be harder to predict than expected. However, that it was possible to develop generalizations at all is

significant. With further research, into these individual factors, it will be possible to develop a deeper objective understanding of the nature of travel photography.

Conclusion

Although over 1200 photos were systematically analyzed, this study only scratched the surface of the underlying patterns and correlations concerning purpose of travel and the character of the photos taken. It is our sincere hope that future researchers will find our typology useful in analyzing photos with an ethnographic lens. Photos thus far have been used as documentary or descriptive sources. It would be useful for people to also see them as primary sources giving us glimpses into the minds of the photographers.

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