

What A Shot! An Anthropological Analysis Of Travel Photography within a Tourist Culture

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On a dark, hardwood shelf, off to the back corner of a quaint room full of books and mementos, resides a group of about ten or fifteen binders. The binders are not, on the outside, very memorable or ornate, most adorned with ripped and ribbed edges, peeling stickers spelling out seemingly random places, and faded and cracking covers. But within the pages situate something of extreme value and importance for me and my family. They contain a plethora of travel photos, which are held dear for their ability to preserve a memory, a time, a place, and an experience. As I approached this project, I returned to these photos, recalling specific experiences that only seemed to be remembered through photos. Travel photos seemed to be a norm, a necessity I couldn't imagine travelling without.

I felt compelled to reevaluate the function of travel photography as more than just a means of remembering a holiday. I did not have a fixed setting and instead observed and communicated across a transient and international environment. The behaviors I sought to observe I found were best in tourist areas, everywhere from Times Square in New York City to small archeology museums in Seville, Spain. My main sources of information were collected through long and dense conversations with close friends and family members, which I set out to be located in such tourist areas. I also relied upon more brief exchanges with fellow travellers and simple observations of tourist behavior from afar. The effects of my decisions will be discussed later.

Tourists confine themselves to a collective movement through a place, compelled to keep within their own boundaries of major tourist attractions. When a traveller escapes these boundaries and move into the periphery, sometimes the outskirts of the area itself, they need to capture their experiences not just to remember but also to present to their friends and families. This anthropological study will examine

how and why certain subjects and cameras are used in travel and how the photos themselves dictate and shape the experience and social interactions of the tourist within this 'travelling culture'. It will also look into whether travel photography presents an authentic version of that experience to other members of this culture both virtually – online – and in reality.

Approaching the Field

I began this encounter with a wide and vague understanding of why photography is so prevalent in the travel ritual, which was based on my own travel experiences, a love for photography, and my aforementioned photo books. My first and most uncertain question was, why are travel photos still necessary with the advent of the Internet and an almost unlimited number of images of a place? I led each of my conversations with this question and for each received a number of different answers. More importantly, this question opened up an abundance of even more questions.

With a compact iPod notepad and small set of questions in hand, I began my conversations. I made my intentions of my ethnography aware with close friends and family. I found, in relation to my later encounters, that because of my candor they not only were more open and forthcoming to the conversation but they appeared unfazed by my note taking and continuous interjections. Others, both tourists and locals of the areas I visited in Spain, reacted in a more cautious manner. When the subject of cameras or photos arose in interactions, I guided the conversation with questions but did not force to return when the subject changed and therefore relied heavily on observation of tourists, which allowed them to be natural and relaxed within their roles as tourists.

Photos as Representation

Why, with Google Images and so many other online resources, does travel photography still seem necessary? I asked this to a close friend, Kiki, sitting casually along the glossy red steps looking out onto the heart of Times Square in New York City. Kiki permanently lives in the city right off the north east side of Central Park and has

been living in New York for nearly three years, navigating through Manhattan and its many tourist attractions. Even with throngs of people surrounding us, her answer seemed almost instantaneous: Facebook. In her experience, and in part mine as well, Facebook has played a significant role in our day-to-day interactions with friends and peers, as one must stage a 'performance of an online self' (Westlake 2008: 23). Those who upload their photos to the site do so for others to view them, functioning as a means of display.

For those like Kiki who live in a major tourist hub, the place must be discovered and represented online in such a way that exhibits the place as not a tourist attraction but a place of permanence. Many young people today, like Kiki, use filtered photos with phone applications like Instagram in order to relay an intimate, more personal relationship to a place, unlike the aforementioned tourists. By continuously posting these more obscure and unrealistic versions of the real, inhabitants of the place overtly exhibit their role as not a tourist but as a resident. Features like the digital images and playback allow the photographer to choose through his own photos before even having to put them online. To further avoid the label of tourist, Kiki, and many of her friends, use smart phones like the iPhone as cameras to physically distance their look from that of a typical tourist.

Kiki further elucidated to me that the social exchange of photographs in these domains causes some conflicts. Unlike presenting your collection to a controllable group of people in a real setting, the audience on the Internet becomes unmanageable. My mother's father, a pilot in the 1960s and 1970s, would gather friends and family after their trips to also display their travel photos with a controlled and managed group of people, which was seen as a spectacle because travel at this time was much less accessible than today. While Facebook friends usually consist of family, friends, peers, and colleagues, others have the capability of not only viewing these pictures, but also downloading them onto their own computers. The 'performance of the self online as

part of a broad range of stagings' (Westlake 2008: 23) is risky as photos can be both physically taken and misunderstood.

Whether on the computer or not or on the Internet or not, a person, not just a tourist, has a relationship with their photos – a sense of ownership. The image represents that person, their eye, and their experience. By releasing them onto Facebook and other social networking sites, these users take the risk of losing that ownership, that claim, and that relationship. As I will speak on later, family, friends, and peers can possibly misconstrue one's self-representation through photos. When people go on holidays, they think about the ways in which photos will be viewed and perceived on these social networking sites.

Photos as Authentic

During my time in Spain, we were lucky enough to take a tour of the majestic and beautiful Pyrenees Mountains. Our tour guide Steven, who also acted as our driver and bird enthusiast, spoke extensively about the history of the area and his own time and relationship with Catalonia. The conversation eventually turned to his website, which features photos, testimonials, and information about the many places one can tour. When he first started his touring business, he relied heavily on his own photos of the birds and landscapes taken on a simple point-and-shoot camera. As he encountered more and more tourists who themselves were claimed photographers, he slowly shifted away from his low-resolution photos to high quality, crisp pictures provided by these clients. Steven related to us that many of his initial visitors were attracted to his website because of these low quality photographs. To them, and to an extent Steven as well, those photos displayed an authenticity to the experience that otherwise could not be exhibited in other types of photos.

This conversation specifically left an impression on me. One of my initial questions for this project was concerning the effects and decisions on the specific camera used in travel photos. In my own experiences, I have used every camera from a

1990's film camera to my current Canon DSLR. While I enjoy the photos that come from my more 'professional' cameras, I had to agree with Steven. The grainy film photos that supply my travel binders seem to carry an authenticity that is unachievable with the crisp digital images of today.

My father's mother's own photo collection is filled with photos of her travels with friends and family. Some are fuzzy, scratched, out of focus, but each one with a little history. He can, through them, relive his own experiences and rediscover moments and people he would have otherwise forgotten. Even today, with the advent of Facebook as I spoke about earlier, the physical photo carries a history and an experience, capturing a reality that has passed. It 'carries on it the marks of its own history...and the fact that it once belonged to a broader visual narrative' (Edwards 2004: 1). Phone applications like Instagram try to recreate this old and faded effect but do not carry the same weight, history, and authenticity that older photos share.

When informants like Steven share that they prefer lower quality or older versions of a photo, they are not revealing a preference for the picture itself, but for the story and history behind the picture. Older photos capture a deeper memory of a person, a place, a time, or an experience. Their distance from the present allows for a more unique indexicality, 'closer to palm prints, death masks, and cast shadows' (Pinney 2011: 68).

With a certain subject, like a street sign, there can be thousands of different photo representations depending upon the camera, the angle, the effects, etc. The memory of that subject, the light, the occupied space, and the person behind the camera become engrained in the photo.

Photos as Social Interaction

My times back in New York, specifically Times Square, and Barcelona, Spain showed me that everyone from tourists to residents like Kiki and professional photographers rely upon a wide variety of cameras but such cameras better define their

role within the tourist culture. This variation is directly related to the role of the individual at the tourist. Residents, like Kiki, at tourist attractions are less likely to carry around substantial cameras instead using camera phones as to not share the physical look as tourists. The camera phone itself is small enough to be concealed and be used for other functions. Residents, then, distance themselves not only in the physical space but also in their own physical appearance to keep themselves in the periphery of the tourist culture despite the fact that they are not even tourists, maintaining the 'distinctive identity or essential characteristics' of that place (Reed 2002: 129).

Similar behavior can be seen with professional photographers, primarily in the tourist attraction setting. The professionals I observed sought to set themselves apart by using the most advanced cameras and lenses, which often were heavy and large, and by wearing equally professional clothing. These accomplished photographers kept to themselves, staying quiet and reserved, in order to focus on the photo first and on the experience second. They, too, hoped to create a façade to present themselves not just as residents but also as a separate group from tourists, in the place for a different function.

The presentation of the person and their camera, then, dictated how they interacted with others in the place. Often tourists will ask others to photograph themselves with their friends and family in front of interesting and memorable subjects. Who was asked depended upon the aforementioned distinctions of presentation. During my ten days in Spain, I was asked a number of times to do just this but I distinctly noticed I was only approached when my own camera was out and I was taking pictures myself. Because tourists often are ostracized into a physical and spatial group, they are then able to build social relationships among one another.

Many of my informants had revealed to me the desire to not be defined as a tourist, instead desiring for a more direct and authentic relationship to the place, a way

for a person to ‘animate a city [or place] and imagine that the place animates them’ (Reed 2002: 129). They also hope to have their photos reflect this move away from the tourist culture both physically and mentally. They instead dress and speak more like the residents of the place they are in and avoid large tourist attractions. Travel photos, too, have evolved away from the stereotypical image of the person in front of well-known monuments and instead show the intricacies and details of the specific and distinct experience like food and street performances. Those who travel seek to differ themselves from the stereotypical tourist and instead work toward not only a more authentic and realistic interaction with the place in their photos but a physical look that mimics the residents themselves.

Photos as Ethnography

As I’ve mentioned a number of times before, the majority of my informants expressed to me that they take photographs on their holidays and vacations as a means of remembering the experience. During my time in the field, I was struck by the number of informants who seemed surprised at the end of our conversations at how influential and important photography is in the travel experience. Most said that they could not imagine travelling without some means of recording and remembering. What would otherwise seem like a normal routine of taking out the camera on a vacation transforms into an important social function and behavior of a very common travel ritual.

When I recall the photo binders in my home, I think not just of the individual photos, but of them as a collection. As I mentioned earlier, we photograph these experience to capture a moment, a reality, and a memory. That too includes the entirety of the experience, not just the individual aspects that made it special. They are ‘indisputably documents of an event, an event that could not be denied’ (Pinney 2011: 80). In a sense, we create our own photographic ethnography of a place and an experience. When I showed my own photographs from my time in Spain to my father, Bruce, he commented that he enjoyed looking through them because they, as a group, showed a personal and distinct experience in a place.

During my reflection time after my fieldwork, I went through a number of friend's photos on Facebook that showed their own experiences in the same places, like Barcelona. And while there were many places I recognized, I also saw places I had not been to, festivals I didn't know existed, and games I had missed during my time. In the same setting, their photos told a different story of an experience that was familiar to them, but completely foreign to me. I, in a sense, once again became unfamiliar with the place and yearned to go back and encounter new people, places, and experiences.

This effect poses a conflict for travel photography and its distribution. On the one hand, it emblemizes a time, a place, a moment, and an experience. But when it is distributed and presented to others through such means as Facebook those photos and their meanings become misconstrued. For instance, one tourist attraction like Times Square can be represented in photos in thousands of different ways depending on a perspective and an eye.

For example, when someone looks through travel magazines or books they create an expectation of a look of a place. Tourist advertising depicts places like Hawaii as paradise and Paris as romantic. It is often critiqued as 'stylizing – or less generously – distorting portrayal of reality' (Hummon 1998: 180). Photojournalism conveys what could be experienced in a place, which directly affects how foreigners perceive that place before even going. There then occurs this dichotomy of both a myriad of fragmented accounts and narratives of a place but also the existence of a unique and rare experience of that setting.

Conclusion

During my time in the field, I was struck by how complex and convoluted one simple action could influence and be influenced by the 'travelling' culture. Travel photography is a significant part of the social 'travel' culture not just because of its practical function of capturing memories but its social implications. While the tourist

community consists of a wide variety of people, including professionals and residents alike, they all desire an authentic and illustrious representation of their travels and experiences. By displaying these photos in a number of different of mediums, they hope to display the distinct relationship they gained with a place. As one advice article tells, travel photography is about;

“Capturing memories as well as places...to take shots of simple things that capture part of the spirit or fun of a journey. Especially in the age of cheap digital photography and nearly unlimited memory cards, there is no reason to edit [oneself] into simply taking photos of town squares and statues. Some people make a point to take shots of interesting meals or weird items they see in markets. These are often the photos we’ll be proudest of when we get back home, and certainly the ones that won’t be found in every other visitor’s collection from that same place” (Spiegel 2008).

In retrospect, I can see that both my in depth conversations and observations proved equally useful as they showed how people observe their photography from afar and how they function in the everyday ritual of travelling. Travel photos are taken ‘to tell a story: [and] their [uniqueness] stems from their insistence on always telling their own story’ (Pinney 2011: 80). My encounters during my fieldwork have taught that there is a greater story behind a photo, not just of that experience, but of the interactions and social implications of the ‘travelling culture’ that influenced the subject, photographer, camera, and display of each photo.

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Photos of Encounters:



Filtered photo of Kiki on her camera phone in Times Square, New York (Taken by Me), 2012