

Visualizing Emotion and Affect: Visitor Encounters at St. Peter's Basilica

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St. Peter's Basilica is the largest church in the world by both area and volume and its impressive structure generates feelings of awe and reverence in visitors. How do visitors portray these emotive experiences? What spaces within the church do they highlight, and how does the space affect their encounter? Other studies of affect and emotion have examined a variety of spaces, but research on historical religious sites and the ways in which they are experienced by visitors remains limited. This project seeks to contribute to the emerging dialog of affect and emotion by providing a case study analyzing visitor photographs of St. Peter's Basilica. These photographs reveal that visitors commonly document beams of light and the structure's impressive ceiling, suggesting that these elements, more than explicitly religious symbols, are central to the emotional experience of encountering the space.

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INTRODUCTION

St. Peter's Basilica located in Vatican City is, by some measures, the largest church in the world. It was built at the height of the Renaissance and each year, attracts an estimated 7 million visitors (Orcutt 2016). Although this impressive site is considered to be a sacred space and a pilgrimage destination for Roman Catholics, it is also a destination for non-religious tourists. As with many religious sites that have become tourist destinations, St. Peter's Basilica represents an intersection of the spiritual and the secular, a location that is experienced contemporaneously as sacred and profane. In either case, it has continually inspired meaningful emotional encounters



among visitors who often document their experience using visual media.

St. Peter's Basilica is certainly one of the most impressive examples of Roman Catholic architecture during the Renaissance. Counted among its architects, artists, and designers are some "of the greatest artists of the age, among them Bramante, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Bernini" (Scotti 2007, 19). In a broader Mediterranean context, the Mediterranean basin is the world's largest tourist destination attracting around one-third of all international tourists (UNEP/MAP: *State of the Mediterranean Marine and Coastal Environment* 2012) and the ways in which people experience and interact with the religious and monumental architecture of this region is a worthy object of study. Studies of emotion and affect have grown in a number of different disciplines (see Pile 2010) but examinations of these phenomena from a visual perspective remain limited. The proliferation of smart phone cameras has made the visual documentation of tourist explorations relatively easy and subsequently the sheer volume of freely accessible imagery can aid researchers in understanding the ways in which visitors understand and portray their spatial encounters. In 2011, Flickr announced that it had reached 6 billion uploaded photos (Olivarez-Giles 2011). The billions of openly accessible photographs on this sharing site alone present researchers from a variety of disciplines and from any world region the unprecedented ability to study emotion and affect from a visual perspective.

This project aims to push research forward in the area of affect and emotion by investigating the ways in which people experience, and visually portray the experience, of visiting religious structures. Specifically, this project analyzes visitor experiences at St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City to determine how affect and emotion factor into their accounts. There are two principle research questions that this project explores. First, how do visitors visually portray their experience at St. Peter's Basilica? Secondly, what spaces within and outside of St. Peter's Basilica do visitors generally represent in their photography? Although St. Peter's Basilica was completed in early the 17th century, its monumental architecture is on a scale still unmatched in today's



society. How often do you walk into a single room that is 190 meters (623 feet) long and 45.5 meters (149 feet) high, or stand under a 136 meter high (446 feet) dome (“The Basilica” 2014)? When it was built beginning in the early 16th century, the height and splendor of the ceiling were meant to elicit notions of heaven (“History” 2014), and photographs taken by visitors reveal that even today, the splendor of St. Peter’s Basilica remains a sight to behold.

While the impressive structure of St. Peter’s Basilica anecdotally generates feelings of awe and reverence in visitors, but little attention has been given to the tangible ways this space is experienced and portrayed by visitors. What spaces within the church do visitors highlight, and how does the space affect their encounter? Other studies of affect and emotion have examined a variety of modern spaces, from homes to megachurches, and have even investigated virtual spaces, but research on historical religious sites and the ways in which they are experienced by visitors remain limited. This project seeks to contribute to the emerging dialog of affect and emotion by providing a case study as well as a theoretical and methodological foundation upon which future research can proceed.

UNDERSTANDING EMOTION, AFFECT, AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Studies of affect and emotion in a religious context have reemerged as a central object of study in a number of different disciplines, to include anthropology (see Bowen 2015), geography (see Finlayson 2012), psychology (see Lee et al. 2012), and religious studies (see Samuels 2010). In these encounters, the participant’s emotional and affective experience becomes centrally important with the researcher commonly relying on in-depth interviews or quantitative surveying and questionnaires. While these studies give needed insight into personal religious experience, there has been little attention given to utilizing other media to uncover the ways in which people portray their own encounters with spiritual spaces.



The ways people interact with and experience spaces can have a significant emotional impact. In exploring the lived experience of Czechoslovakia's 1989 Velvet Revolution, for example, Trnka (2012, 50) found that for participants "being part of the event of the revolution is /---/ evoked not only in terms of its emotional impact /---/ but also by locating the physical self within public spaces that are invested (or in many cases re-invested) with novel political and personal meaning and dramatically enlarged through new connections with the global or European sphere." Though not explicitly focusing on emotion, Premazzi et al. (2013) found a significant emotional component to the ways in which first- and second-generation Egyptians living in Italy were affected by the events of the Arab Spring relating to both their present location and their conceptions of their ethnic homeland. In an editorial on emotional geographies, Davidson and Milligan (2004, 524) noted: "Our attempts to understand emotion or make sense of space are, thus, somewhat circular in nature. We can, perhaps, usefully speak of an emotio-spatial hermeneutic: emotions are understandable - 'sensible' - only in the context of particular places. Likewise, place must be felt [emphasis in original] to make sense." This place-based emotional experience can be explored from a variety of different disciplines and methodological perspectives. Krafft and Adey (2008, 213), for example, combine architectural analysis and theories of nonrepresentation to undertake a geographic analysis of the experience of being in buildings. They write: "For architects and their buildings to be taken seriously, buildings must be imbued with the power to make a difference to their inhabitants" (ibid.). It is this feeling of being in places that helps explain what drives tourists to explore particular destinations. Why travel to the Mediterranean, for example, instead of simply watching a film about the region? The act of *being in* spaces has a powerful capacity to affect an emotional response.

Being in spaces is a decidedly personal encounter, and thus individual experience becomes centrally important. Within geography, researchers have continually called for a greater attention to the lived religious experience (Holloway 2006; Kong 1990, 2010), and some studies have contributed to this growing



body of research (see Pile 2010). Williams (2016), for example, examined emotional experiences of the spiritual landscapes of Pentecostal worship. Holloway (2006, 182) investigated sensuous experiences in the space of the séance in the nineteenth century spiritualist movement, finding that “wider cultural-political discursive practices were (re)produced and sometimes challenged in the construction of this space.”

If the location of the affective encounter is meaningful, as researchers have continued to find, then what role can modern technology play in the documentation of that location? If an emotive and affective spiritual encounter is the product of or is inspired by particular places, researchers could then analyze the ways participants document place. As Rose (2016, 2) notes, visual “images are never transparent windows onto the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways; they represent it” (ibid.). In this way, photographs can be used to peer through the lens, both literal and metaphorical, through which participants viewed their own experience. Furthermore, there is intentionality behind what we decide to visually document and these visual documentations of affective encounters could provide researchers with a tangible representation of personal, emotional experience. This research project seeks to build upon existing literature on emotion and place by providing a new avenue of analysis and insight into how participants document their own experience of encountering spaces.

METHODOLOGY

For this project, a team of researchers including two undergraduate students queried Flickr, an online photo sharing website, for photographs of St. Peter’s Basilica. Images of St. Peter’s Basilica were tagged using a number of different spellings, including “Saint Peter’s Basilica,” “St. Peter’s Basilica,” and “St Peter’s.” Although other search strings provided a larger set of images, the complete spelling out of “Saint Peter’s Basilica” provided a large set (over 21,000 results) of images that were primarily of St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City rather than a number of other St. Peter’s churches and Cathedrals around the world. The students thus ran a simple



search for “Saint Peter’s Basilica,” filtered the images to only include images published under the Creative Commons license (a total of 2,876 photographs), and collected the first 500 results. By filtering only photographs published under the Creative Commons license, we were able to analyze images primarily taken by amateur photographers rather than professionals.

The image URL and caption were imported into Google Sheets to enable collaboration and each image was given a unique identification number. One difficulty students encountered was that Flickr did not always order the photographs the same using the identical search strings on different days. Thus, at times, duplicate photographs were collected. To address this problem, once all 500 image URLs and captions were collected, we sorted and analyzed the list to remove any duplicate URLs. We then confirmed that the images were of indeed of St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City and removed any erroneously tagged results. We were then left with 470 unique images of St. Peter’s Basilica.

Each image was hand coded using Google Sheets. The primary investigator and an undergraduate researcher worked to create a list of codes that, following Rose’s (2016) guidelines, clearly connected with the broader cultural context within which the image was situated. Some coding categories were fairly obvious and easy to determine: location (inside or outside), number of people (none, one, two to five, or six or more), camera distance (close up, long, etc.), and camera angle (directly overhead, up, eye level, or down). Other categories were more problematic, however. If a visitor took a picture of the ceiling, for example, was the focus of the image the ceiling itself, a particular decoration on the ceiling, or a light fixture? If a painting of an angel was present in the photograph, was that considered primary content and intentionally photographed or was it tangential to the photographer’s intended focus? In order to begin to address these issues, we created two coding categories: target (referring to the primary architectural focus of the photograph) and primary content (referring to the clearly visible, in-focus symbols or other content that appeared in the central view of the photograph.) We began by analyzing a small sample of the photographs in order to revise and refine our codes, expanding



primary content to include content that might not constitute traditional cultural symbols but commonly appeared in photographs and expanding the target category to include people and artwork. The research team then coded the set of 470 images, rectifying any coding discrepancies through discussion.

The primary methodology for this project was content analysis, following the model of Krippendorf (2013), Burgess et al. (2007), and Rose (2016). Through a content analysis of visual imagery, researchers can determine key themes in a similar way as one might analyze interviews or texts (Rose 2016). The research team conducted an initial coding analysis by hand and then imported the codes into Nvivo 10, a qualitative analysis software package, in order to ensure rigor in our final results. Nvivo 10 offers a number of qualitative analysis techniques including content queries that result in word counts and visual word cloud displays.

It was clear to the research team even after coding a relatively small number of images that there were several key themes in visitor's images of St. Peter's Basilica. While we expected a significant number of images to have prominent religious symbolism, far more images had what might be considered nontraditional spiritual elements such as light. Less surprising for a building of its impressive stature, numerous images were aimed upward at the intricately decorated ceiling or the massive marble columns. This visual content analysis, while offering unique insight into the ways in which people experience and perceive St. Peter's Basilica, can more broadly offer researchers a unique perspective into the affective and emotive capacity of our surroundings.

VISUALIZING EXPERIENCES IN ST. PETER'S BASILICA

It is clear that particular spaces can inspire a variety of emotions, a capacity for affective experience. How do visitors document and convey these affective encounters? What do visitor photographs tell us about the ways we interact with and experience religious spaces? Although photographs of St. Peter's Basilica were wide-ranging in their subjects and particular visual compositions, several key themes emerged after conducting an in-depth content analysis.



Of the set of 470 images, slightly more than half (62%) were of the interior of St. Peter's Basilica. Visitors used a variety of camera distances, with some images a close up of a particular feature (13%), and others taken from a very long distance (14%). Most images, however, could be characterized as taken from a medium (37%) or long (37%) distance. This indicates that people photographed the Basilica as they experienced it, often gazing at the building or its architectural elements from a distance.

For many visitors, it is clear that when entering the basilica, there is a tendency to look up. Out of the 290 interior photos analyzed, 127 (44%) were pointed upward, often capturing the two meter (6.6 feet) tall gold lettering that circles the dome and reads from the Latin Vulgate: "TV ES PETRVS ET SVPER HANC PETRAM AEDIFICABO ECCLESIAM MEAM. TIBI DABO CLAVES REGNI CAELORVM" ("You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven") (Binz 2015, 11). In addition to the dome, gold lettering extends around the top of walls of the Basilica and was prominent in many of the interior photographs (41%).

Figure 1: St. Peter's Basilica, Seba Sofariu, Flickr, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic



Relatively few photographs (40%) included people and of these, only fourteen photographs (3%) had a person as the main subject of the image. This suggests that visitors were more interested in documenting the architecture or features of the Basilica itself rather than documenting themselves being in or outside of the space.

Within the interior of the Basilica, St. Peter's Baldachin was the most commonly photographed specific structure, featured in 21% of all interior photographs. While visitors often photographed religious symbols such as the cross (22%) or Biblical figures (13%), there seemed to be a broader desire to capture the affective capacity of the space itself rather than document the cultural symbols present. Over two-thirds of the interior photos (37%) were of the Basilica's impressive ceiling, for example, indicating that while there are other affective symbols and architectural elements, the height and grandeur of the structure itself was a central element of visitor experiences.

Figure 2: Saint Peter's Basilica, Matt Chan, Flickr, Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic



Outside of the Basilica, the most common photograph was of the front, exterior of the church (50%). Other commonly photographed areas were the dome (18%) or St. Peter's Square (11%). Although the cross was the most photographed symbolic element among exterior photographs of the Basilica (54%), other nontraditional cultural symbols were also prominent. Clouds were featured in almost half (46%) of exterior images and 21% of exterior images featured light, most commonly documenting

the lights of the Basilica at night or views of sunlight behind the Basilica. Again, this signals that visitors likely documented their personal experience of the Basilica, perhaps documenting their initial approach to the building and then the areas that were particularly affective once inside.

Figure 3: Italy-0179 - Last Night Shot for now, Dennis Jarvis, Flickr, Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic

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More broadly, light was a common element among visitor photographs. In fact, over half (60%) of interior photographs featured beams of light, light from windows, or light fixtures. Relatively few photographs featured depictions of Jesus (3% of all photographs) or angels (10% of all photographs). A word cloud created by Nvivo 10 using an analysis of the primary content in the photographs supplements this content analysis and reveals “gold,” “columns,” and “light” were more common in photographs than other, explicitly religious symbolism.

Figure 4: Primary Content Word Cloud Created by Author with Nvivo 10



This relatively high number of photographs of light compared to more traditional religious elements could be explained by a number of factors. While the Basilica is indeed a Roman Catholic house of worship, it is visited by millions of tourists each year, many of whom are not likely practicing Catholics. The beams of light might thus have a stronger affective capacity for tourists compared to a sculpture like La Pieta, which was only featured in five (2%) of the interior photographs, or images of biblical figures (20% of interior photographs).

Relatively few photographs had descriptive captions; most photographs were captioned with either the picture number (such as “IMG_229”) or with the location (such as “Saint Peter’s Basilica.”) Of the photographs that included more descriptive captions, the most common term used to describe photographs was “light” (12 photographs.) One photograph, for example, was captioned “Divine Light, St. Peter’s Basilica.” For this visitor, the beams of light clearly had a spiritual significance and the number of photographs that prominently featured beams of light (17% of the interior photographs) indicates that a number of visitors had a similar experience.

Figure 5: Divine Light, Mzximvs VdB, Flickr, Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic



Why did visitors commonly photograph beams of light or the basilica’s ceiling? One limitation of visual content analysis, as opposed to in-depth interviews, is that the photographs are subject to the researcher’s interpretation. The content represented in the image is just that, a representation, and what the image

is meant to represent or the particular emotions experienced by the participant remain elusive. However, the significant number of photographs that shared the theme of light or the high percentage of interior photographs of the building's ceiling speaks to a common experience and indicate the emotive power of the space.

CONCLUSION

Our lived experience is constantly being made and remade by the spaces we occupy and the places we encounter. Whether sitting at our office desk surrounded by mementos, immersing ourselves in a forest on a hike, or exploring a historic building in a new city, these spaces are layered with meanings and each has a unique capacity to affect our emotions. While both emotional and affective investigations are experiencing resurgence in academic research, visual explorations of these phenomena remain limited. Visual representations of being in and around spaces, however, provide tangible evidence of the ways in which people experience the world around them.

As this project has demonstrated, an analysis of visual imagery can shed light on personal affective and emotive spatial encounters. While one might expect visitors to St. Peter's Basilica to be most affected by religious symbolism, it is clear from an analysis of images from Flickr that beams of light and the high ceiling of the structure were far more likely to be photographed indicating that these features had a particularly strong capacity to inspire an emotional response.

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