

Humanistic Emotions—Expressing Emotions Through the Practice of Street Photography

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Abstract

Human emotions, as a fundamental aspect of human experience, manifest in diverse ways within the visual arts. Street photography, characterized by its immediacy, spontaneity, and authenticity, emerges as a compelling medium for capturing and communicating emotional states. This study adopts street photography as a methodological tool to investigate how visual language—such as composition, lighting, and unposed moments—encodes both individual and collective emotional expressions. By conducting field-based photographic practices and subsequent image analysis, the research deciphers emotionally charged street scenes, including solitary figures, intimate encounters, and moments of social tension, to uncover their symbolic emotional content. Complementary audience surveys further examine the mechanisms through which such imagery elicits emotional resonance. Findings reveal a multifaceted framework of emotional representation: street photography conveys transient personal emotions, reflects broader socio-cultural affective undercurrents, and fosters empathetic viewer engagement. The study underscores the potential of photography as a vehicle for visual storytelling, humanistic inquiry, and social commentary.

Keywords

Human emotions; Street photography; Emotional expression.

1. Introduction

In contemporary visual art research, emotional expression has always been a core issue, and street photography, with its immediacy, authenticity, and spontaneity, serves as an important medium for capturing and conveying human emotions. This study focuses on the practice of emotional expression in street photography, moving beyond the traditional singular emphasis on technique and aesthetics. Through systematic creative practice and in-depth image analysis, it explores how visual elements such as composition, lighting, and color work together to create emotionally compelling works. Adopting a practice-oriented approach, the research not only expands the dimensions of photographic art studies by systematically examining emotional expression as an independent subject of inquiry but also establishes an intrinsic connection between street photography and emotional expression at the theoretical level. This provides a new framework for understanding the social function and aesthetic value of photographic art, while also offering photographers fresh insights into more effectively conveying emotions through visual language, thereby fostering innovation in the practice of photographic art.

2. Analysis of Theoretical Dimensions of Humanistic Emotions

2.1. Overview of the Sociality and Cultural Encoding of Emotions

The theory of emotional sociality and cultural encoding reveals the collective construction of human emotional expression. Grounded in Raymond Williams' concept of "structure of feeling," this framework views emotions as collective experiential patterns shaped by shared social practices in specific historical periods, characterized by three core features: cultural specificity (e.g., differences between Eastern and Western artistic expressions), historical dynamism (evolving from kinship-based to professional-identity models), and power permeation (Foucault's notion of implicit discipline). Visual arts transform emotions through a dual mechanism: technical approaches like composition and lighting, and cultural constraints imposed by social-emotional structures. In the digital era, social platforms have reconstructed the rules of emotional encoding, opening new perspectives for research on the interaction between art and social emotions.

2.2. Mechanisms of Emotional Transmission in Photography

Photography achieves emotional encoding through a visual symbolic system (composition, lighting, color), with its transmission process encompassing three dimensions: creator encoding (e.g., Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" capturing fleeting joy), symbolic representation in imagery (e.g., warm/cool tones establishing emotional undertones), and viewer decoding (culturally contextualized reinterpretation). This mechanism relies both on technical control (e.g., shallow depth of field intensifying a subject's solitude) and implicit constraints imposed by socio-emotional structures (e.g., ethical tensions in war photography), ultimately completing emotional transmission through the interaction between creator, image, and viewer. In the digital era, algorithmic curation on social media has further reshaped this transmission chain, giving rise to new paradigms of emotional expression.

2.2.1. Instantaneity and Emotional Solidification

Photography achieves the congelation and sublimation of emotions through its unique capacity for temporal instantaneity. Technically manifested in the mechanical shutter's millisecond-level precision that transforms fluid reality into static visual texts, this process finds its philosophical articulation in Roland Barthes' concept of "Ça a été" (That-has-been) - the shutter's release not only arrests spatiotemporal continuity but reifies transient emotional energy into contemplative visual testimony. This affective solidification materializes through two paradigmatic approaches: Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" aesthetic transmutes mundane scenes into poetic emotional hieroglyphs through anticipatory framing (exemplified in *Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare*), while Capa's "moment of presence" employs motion blur to amplify traumatic immediacy (as in *The Falling Soldier*). Its material ontology operates bidimensionally: silver halide's granular materiality preserves emotional warmth, while patinated surfaces invite viewers' psychological projections. Digital evolution (high-speed bursts, ISO optimization), while expanding temporal capture, problematizes the "digital instant"'s authenticity - does postprocessing vitiate Barthesian ontological purity? Social media's "screen-captured moments" (e.g., iPhone Live Photos) further establish a dialectic between stasis and flux, ultimately revealing photographic instantaneity as a complex interface mediating material substrates, emotional mnemonics, and cultural epistemes - its metamorphosis perpetually resonating with humanity's perennial interrogation of temporality and emotional preservation.

2.2.2. The Emotional Metaphor of Visual Signs

In street photography, visual symbols serve as the core code for conveying human emotions, constructing emotional narratives through the visual syntax of urban textures and crowd interactions. This metaphorical system manifests in three dimensions within street practice:

spatial symbols (e.g., the oppressive narrow alleys implying urban anxiety), body language (e.g., a hunched silhouette encoding loneliness), and material traces (e.g., weathered walls evoking collective memory through historical sedimentation). Its mechanism aligns with Roland Barthes' "urban semiotics"—Parisian café terraces (as captured by Doisneau) metaphorize French social rituals via the geometric arrangement of tables and chairs—while also permeating Lefebvre's logic of spatial production: migrant workers gathering on overpasses (e.g., Chang Chien-Chi's Taipei Station) unconsciously reveal the emotional structure of social hierarchies through spatial occupation. Contemporary street photographers like Bruce Gilden use aggressive flash to transform facial textures into geological strata of urban stress, while Helen Levitt decodes unbridled joy through the bodily symbols of children's games (e.g., silhouettes of hopscotch in New York streets). In the digital era, mobile photography's vertical composition and rule of thirds are reshaping the encoding of street emotions—Instagram's middle-class aesthetic (e.g., symmetrical framing with warm tones) systematically filters out chaotic real emotions, prompting a new generation of street photographers (e.g., Japan's Tomosei Daidoji) to deliberately use lens distortion and overexposure to disrupt this metaphorical paradigm, reconstructing the humanistic authenticity of the street through technological rebellion.

2.2.3. Photographer's Emotional Intervention

In street photography practice, the photographer's emotional engagement manifests as a dialectical process of selective gaze—when the camera is raised, the photographer's personal emotional structure and value judgments subtly permeate the compositional choices. Susan Sontag in *On Photography* reveals this intervention's duality: on one hand, it appears as an ethical choice (e.g., Diane Arbus's close-up shots of marginalized groups, using visual oppression to confront viewers with social exclusion mechanisms); on the other, it reflects an aesthetic complicity (e.g., Vivian Maier's low-angle shots that deify ordinary workers, transforming class empathy into monumental visual language). Contemporary street photography has evolved two intervention paradigms: aggressive intervention (e.g., Bruce Gilden's flash violently disrupts urban facades, the technical violence itself becoming a vehicle for emotional critique) and covert intervention (e.g., Liu Tao's multi-year fixed-route shooting allows urban absurdity to emerge naturally within the folds of images). In the digital era, such intervention is further mediated by algorithms—Instagram hashtags (e.g., #streetphotography) establish a globalized template for emotional expression, prompting a new generation of photographers like Japan's Rinko Kawauchi to counter this emotional homogenization through minimalist composition, restoring the precise measure of individual emotion through restraint.

2.3. Creation Methodology

2.3.1. Observation Strategy: Anticipation and Waiting for Spontaneous Scenes

The observation strategy in street photography is essentially a spatio-temporal game, where creators, within the fluid urban theater, capture the poetic essence of spontaneous events through anticipatory gaze and delayed waiting. Bresson's "decisive moment" theory exemplifies this classic paradigm—photographers must anticipate street elements' potential combinations like chess players (e.g., the geometric resonance between the jumper and background poster in Gare Saint-Lazare), while maintaining a hunter's patience for the perfect convergence of light, gesture, and spatial dynamics. Conversely, Vivian Maier developed a counter-strategy: using covert observation (e.g., via reflective surfaces or pretending to read newspapers) to minimize her presence, allowing the scene's natural drama to emerge. Digital-era technologies (e.g., silent smartphone shutters) have expanded observational dimensions, yet the core tension persists—over-anticipation risks theatricalizing the image (e.g., ethical debates in contemporary staged street photography), while pure waiting may fall into the aesthetic trap of randomness. An effective observation strategy lies in the dialectical unity of

anticipation's precision and waiting's openness, as exemplified by Eugène Atget's documentation of old Paris, balancing a clockmaker's calculation of architectural light-shadow shifts with a poetic receptivity to the serendipitous entry of passersby.

2.3.2. Low-Intervention Shooting and Restrained Post-Processing

Low-intervention shooting and restrained post-processing together construct a comprehensive ethical-technical framework for imagery, with the core principle of minimizing human intervention to preserve the scene's original authenticity and emotional integrity. During shooting, this manifests as physical restraint: using compact equipment (e.g., Leica M-series rangefinder cameras) to reduce presence, employing ambient light and wide-angle prime lenses (e.g., 28mm) to maintain spatial objectivity, and adhering to the "three-no rule"—no scene staging, no subject interference, and no predetermined outcomes, as exemplified by Robert Frank's alienation through natural light in *The Americans*. Post-processing emphasizes digital restraint, with quantified standards including exposure adjustments (within ± 1.5 stops), saturation control (increase $\leq 20\%$), and prohibition of structural edits. This restraint, far from technical conservatism, mirrors Walker Evans' FSA project, where precise tonal control highlights reality's tension. In the digital era, RAW format's linear processing and Lightroom's "history" function serve as tools for ethical scrutiny, their synergy ensuring the image acts as a transparent medium of reality rather than a stage for the creator's subjective expression.

3. Literature References

3.1. The current research status on using street photography to express humanistic emotions.

The current research on street photography as a medium for expressing humanistic emotions demonstrates multidimensional developments. As Gu Zheng elucidates in *The History of World Photography*, post-1960s street photography has evolved from a mere documentary tool into an "emotional vehicle," where photographers achieve empathetic engagement with marginalized social groups through instantaneous captures—an aesthetic zenith realized in the high-contrast imagery of practitioners like Daido Moriyama [1]. This perspective finds cross-cultural validation in Henry Jenkins' theory of "participatory culture" from *Textual Poachers*, which reveals how the immediacy of street photography transforms it into a democratized medium for public emotional expression, with the power dynamics between photographer and subject reconstructing traditional visual narratives [3]. Scholarly focus primarily converges on three dimensions: (1) At the techno-ethical level, the tension between digital intervention and humanistic authenticity has spurred creative strategies like "silhouette photography" to circumvent portrait rights controversies; (2) Methodologically, Jenkins' "textual poaching" framework has been transposed to visual studies, explaining how public street imagery reconstructs urban memory; (3) In localized practices, China's new-generation photographers have cultivated indigenous emotional paradigms through narratives of hutong and urban villages, diverging from Western "decisive moment" theory [2]. Notably, contemporary scholarship emphasizes bidirectional emotional interaction between photographers and subjects over unilateral image extraction—a paradigm shift particularly evident in the digital era's "collaborative street photography" practices.

Contemporary scholarship underscores the bidirectional emotional interplay between photographers and subjects, with the "collaborative street photography" model demonstrating marked advantages in the digital era: it not only dismantles the unidirectional "gaze-being gazed at" power dynamic inherent in traditional street photography, transforming the creative process into a practice of humanistic engagement, but also fosters the subjects' agential expression, thereby advancing street photography as a visual archive for communal memory-

building[5]. This paradigm shift finds vivid embodiment in China's local practices. As illustrated in Figure 1, Wang Wei's *Alleyway Glance* (2023) exemplifies this approach by co-constructing the scene with his subject—an elderly man whose relaxed posture mirrors the photographer's reflection in the windowpane, while the vintage photo album in his hands materializes Jenkins' notion of "participatory culture" [3]. This visually articulates Gu Zheng's conceptualization of "collaborative documentary": "When photography shifts from plunder to gift-giving, the image bears dual witness—capturing both the object and the photographer's ethical stance" [4]. Such methodology navigates portrait-rights controversies while preserving documentary authenticity, achieving an organic synthesis of anthropological depth and the lyrical spontaneity emblematic of street photography.



Figure 1. Wang Wei's Mutual Regard in the Alleyway

4. Conclusion

This study delves into the expression of humanistic emotions in street photography, revealing that truly moving works often stem from genuine interactions between photographers and their subjects. As demonstrated in Wang Wei's *Gaze in the Alleyway*, through prolonged engagement and communication, photographers can capture the most natural and authentic emotional expressions of their subjects, like the elderly man in the photograph. This teaches us that good street photography isn't about "sneaky shots," but rather about building trust and friendship. Moving forward, we recommend that photographers spend more time chatting with their subjects to understand their stories; involve subjects in the creative process by letting them choose settings or props; and create community photo walls where neighbors can view and discuss the work. Additionally, documenting the shooting process with smartphones can make the work more transparent and credible, while adapting shooting methods to local cultural characteristics is equally important. These down-to-earth approaches will help photographers create warmer, more touching works while helping the public better understand and support street photography - ultimately transforming it into a genuine bridge connecting human emotions.

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