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# Does a Mechanistic Etiology Reduce Artistic Agency?

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ABSTRACT. In this article, I reject the position maintained by the 'orthodox theorists' of photography that there is a sharp-divide between aesthetic and epistemic value based upon whether a work has a mechanistic or manugraphic etiology. Instead, I argue in support of the 'new theorists' of photography that aesthetic and epistemic values are contingent upon the purpose of an image, not whether an image has been created using labour-saving mechanistic processes or intentional manugraphic processes. Specifically, I propose that a mechanistic etiology does not necessarily reduce artistic agency - which I define as the realization of artistic intentions. I examine historical and contemporary image-making processes throughout the article and as a result of this investigation, I suggest that degrees of intentionality and mechanicity can vary depending upon the image-generating processes that are used in the fulfilment of realizing an artistic intention or creating a work for a specific epistemic purpose. Consequently, I propose that epistemic and aesthetic values are not determined by whether a work is typified as mechanical or manugraphic, but how mechanical or manugraphic processes are used, very often together, to achieve specific pictorial aims.

## 1. Introduction

Different approaches to picturing the world require different image-making processes. Some of these processes may be manugraphic or by hand (Friday 2002, p40) and others may be mechanical, or made with the assistance of labour-saving devices and processes.[2] According to the 'orthodox theorists' of photography, aesthetic value is associated with intentional manugraphic processes, whilst epistemic value is associated with naturally-dependent (Currie 1991, p24) mechanical recordings. Therefore, the orthodox theorists,

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[2] I will use the terms mechanical and mechanistic interchangeably.

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particularly Scruton, have argued that as photography is a naturally-dependent mechanical medium it is not properly artistic. This sharp-divide between aesthetic and epistemic values based on whether a work has a mechanistic or manugraphic etiology is not however, in keeping with actual image-making practice.

In some cases, mechanical processes can aid the fulfilment of an artist's intention to artistically represent a naturally-dependent subject. Additionally, manugraphic processes that are subject to regulations can result in works of high epistemic value. Consequently, I propose that degrees of intentionality and mechanicity can vary depending upon the image-generating processes that are used in the fulfilment of realizing an artistic intention. I provide support for the position held by 'new theorists' of photography, who propose that aesthetic and epistemic values are contingent and that photographic processes often require the intentional input of the maker. Respectively, I demonstrate that a mechanistic etiology does not necessarily reduce artistic agency, specifically the fulfilment of artistic intentions and that we should not hold a sharp-divide between aesthetic and epistemic values based on whether a work has a mechanical or manugraphic etiology. As a result of this proposition, I also defend the view that photography can still be epistemically valuable amidst post-photographic concerns regarding a greater degree of intentionality in digital photographic processes.[3]

Firstly, I outline the orthodox view of a pre-conceived difference in values between mechanistic and manugraphic works. I contrast this with the new theorists' proposed principles of photography, highlighting how they accommodate intentional input. Sympathetic to this position, in the following section I examine how the representation of a naturally-dependent subject can still be artistic by examining historical modes of picturing, whilst I provide further evidence for the proposal that a mechanistic etiology does not determine epistemic and aesthetic values by examining the diverse historical use of the camera obscura. Following this, in the final section I argue that post-photographic concerns about the diminishment of epistemic

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[3] '…the digital worry is about too much agency. This paradox should motivate us to consider what kinds of agency we value, and for what.' (Maynard 2010, p33).

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value in photography are unfounded. As per my argument, I propose that the potentially greater degree of intentionality in digital photographic processes does not preclude epistemic value.

## 2. The Sharp-Divide

For the orthodox theorists of photography, aesthetic value is associated with intentional forms of representation (Scruton 1981, p593). Conversely, epistemic value is associated with naturally-dependent mechanically produced representations (Currie 1999, p286). This has led to a sharp-divide between mechanical and manugraphic works as the orthodox theorists have maintained that the former image type has high epistemic value but at the cost of low aesthetic value. For the new theorists of photography however, these are not necessary values and rather than assigning such values based upon image types, they argue that we should assign aesthetic and epistemic values based upon the context or purpose of the image (Lopes 2016, p112). I will be providing support for the new theorists' view, but first I will say more about the orthodox position and the distinction between intentional and naturally-dependent mechanically produced representations.

The orthodox theorists include Walton, Scruton and Currie. Whilst each takes different approaches, they do all hold the view that photography is a form of naturally-dependent representation (Currie 1991, p25., Scruton 1981, p579., Walton 1984, p264). This means that what appears in the resultant image reflects what was actually before the camera rather than the intentional states of the maker.[4] They also all express the view that photography has a high similarity relation to the subject and so in some sense the image functions as a surrogate form of seeing. Because the formation of the image is naturally-dependent and mechanical it therefore bypasses the maker's cognition and so photography it has been reasoned by these theorists, has high epistemic value. Due to this same reason it is

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[4] Second-generation orthodox theorist Abell argues that the photographer's intentional input can sever the natural-dependence on the subject, meaning that the result is not genuinely photographic (2010, p84).

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argued, by Scruton in particular, that photographs cannot be artistic representations (1981, p589). Manugraphic art forms, like painting, have conventionally been held up as representational arts whereby we take an interest in the artist's intentional states and actions and importantly an intentional subject (Scruton 1981, p579). As a result, these works are said to have high aesthetic value, but as their formation is dependent upon the mentation of the maker they do not need to portray an existent subject and so are not reliable like naturally-dependent representations are in this respect. Hence, they are said to have lower epistemic value (Hopkins 2012, p74).

The new theorists, including Lopes, Costello, Wilson (née Phillips), Atencia-Linares and arguably Maynard, have however, argued that photographs can be intentional representations and that epistemic value is contingent depending upon the use of the work (Phillips 2009, p17). The strength of new theory is that it is sympathetic to actual photographic practice. By contrast, the orthodox theorists have discussed photography in terms of ideals, or the most automated version of photography possible (Wilson 2012, p55).What they neglect is that photography is a multi-stage process that requires choices to be made in order to materialize an image (Costello 2017, p79). The new theorists however, in various formulations of the position, conceive of photography as a multi-stage process, at the heart of which is the photographic event (Phillips 2009, p10). This event is the non-intentional, mechanical core of photography, which the new theorists have shrunk to the registering of light on photosensitive surfaces (Lopes 2016, 81).

By minimizing the non-intentional core of photography to the photographic event, the new theorists allow for varying degrees of intentional input into the subsequent processes that materialize the photographic event and lead to the creation of the photographic object (Costello 2016, p144). As such, photography could be almost fully mechanized as with Polaroid photography or it could be very much dependent on the choices and skilled use of the medium as is the case with gum bichromate processes. In order to assess which photographs are artistic, Wilson has proposed that all photographs are images, but that in addition

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some are also pictures (Phillips 2009, p18). Photographic images are everyday banal snapshots, whilst photographic pictures tend to involve higher degrees of intentionality and articulate about the subject through photographic means.

It is photographic pictures that have aesthetic value and I will now explain what constitutes photographic means. Essentially, it is the manipulation of light, and this could be through double exposure as for example can be seen in the 1946 portrait of Max Ernst by Frederick Sommers (National Gallery U.S.A, 2017). Or the movement of the subject or latent image during the photographic event as for instance in the warped 1930 self-portrait of Bernice Abbott. There are a number of other methods that allow the photographer to control local, rather than global features of the photograph through the intentional manipulation of light (Atencia-Linares 2012, p22). The association with reality in these images serves to heighten the meaning and appreciation of such works (Atencia-Linares 2012, p23).

The aforementioned examples are instances of analogue photography. The processing of digital photographs does not however, take place in the darkroom but through the use of photo-editing software. This gives photographers the opportunity to control every detail of the image if they so wish, and to a degree that outstrips the control that is available in any manugraphic media, as one is able to manipulate the values of every pixel, isolate and create layers of the image and undo steps without leaving a trace of such alterations. Consequently, artists such as Jeff Wall have composed photographs, much in the same way as one composes a painting (Manchester 2003). Wall has digitally pasted together digital photographs to create fictional but visually plausible scenes of reality. Whilst digital photographic processes conflate the production and post-production stages of photography, it is still the case that Wall has made a photographic picture, as despite having greater control of the local features, his composite creation is still effectively the control of light.

We can now confidently assert that photographic processes are not always purely naturally-dependent or mechanical. There are often varying degrees of mechanicity and intentionality that enable makers to create

artistic works using the medium of photography. What we have yet to address is that the aforementioned works still represent naturally-dependent subjects. As such, in the next section I will show how artists historically worked from reality using mechanical processes to create artistic representations of reality.

## 3. Representing Reality

In this section, I will focus on one of the historical precursors to photography, the camera obscura which was considered to be a mechanical way to make images (Kemp 1990, p199). To use the camera obscura was to trace over a projected light image, which as with photographic light images, was from a naturally-dependent subject. This device was utilized by those making maps and scientific images in order to accurately record visual information, but was also used by image-makers who wanted to artistically interpret reality. I will show that artists working in a different mode of picturing have been able to artistically represent naturally-dependent subjects and that this mode of representation is analogous to a standard that many photographers work to. Moreover, I will provide further evidence that epistemic value is not necessarily generated in images with a mechanical etiology.

Whilst there was divided opinion during the Renaissance on whether the use of an optical device prevented artistic representation, there has since been a lot of support provided for the view that the camera obscura is especially useful for artists who work in a 'descriptive' mode of picturing.[5] Within the Dutch culture of picturing, art was used as a visual description of the world (Alpers 1983, p24), rather than a visual narrative as was advocated in Renaissance Italy by Alberti. In contrast to 'Albertian' pictures, the interest in descriptive or 'Keplerian' pictures was in the way

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[5] For artists working in Renaissance Italy the dominant mode of picturing was the 'Albertian' mode. This placed heavy emphasis on the artist's use of reason and technical skill to portray a narrative event like a historical or religious scene. Consequently, Renaissance Italian artists criticized artists in the north as being unimaginative and unskilled due to their descriptive portrayals of reality and use of devices like the camera. (Kemp 1990, p163)

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that artists represented their visual experience of the naturally-dependent subject (Friday 2001, p355).The descriptive mode of representation is often subtler than works made in the Albertian mode but it functions well as a representation of 'expressive perception' (Friday 2001, p359). Vermeer for instance, is purported to have used a camera obscura to create his descriptive paintings and whilst the subjects of his works may be naturally-dependent, the way in which he has applied paint to represent his visual experience of them is undeniably artistic.[6] Mechanical devices are particularly good at helping artists to achieve this effect, but it is not prescriptive that this is the only outcome.

During the 18th century, the use of the camera obscura was more widely documented and it was used for a variety of purposes. The camera obscura was most frequently used in Britain to represent scenery and buildings and to create sweeping panoramas that faithfully recorded the landscape, resulting in images that were intended to be of high epistemic value.[7] Others however, used the camera to depict fictional scenes in a plausibly realistic manner. For instance, it is known that Canaletto used a camera obscura to sketch scenes of Venice directly from life (The National Gallery, London, 2017., Davies 1995). It is also known however, that he used these accurate visual descriptions to depict Venice's building and bridges from impossible viewpoints, stitch scenes together and create fictional montages of famous buildings and unrealized architectural projects.[8] In contrast to those who used the camera obscura to create accurate maps of high epistemic value, Canaletto used the device to realistically depict a view of 18th century Venice that took on artistic liberties. Therefore, the use of naturally-dependent mechanistic processes does not predetermine the epistemic or aesthetic value of a work.

Some     image-makers     capitalized     on     the     naturally-dependent

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[6] It has been proposed by many theorists that the use of the camera obscura by artists is comparable to a composition machine (Steadman 2005, p.308, Sato 2010, p.106, Jelley 2013, p21).

[7] Thomas and Paul Sandby are particularly noteworthy in this respect (Kemp 1990, p198).

[8] 'Canaletto 'cut out' images from the city (usually Venice) both real and unbuilt, and recombined them in static montages of urban spaces…' (Stoppanni 2014, p518)

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mechanical nature of the camera obscura to produce images with high fidelity to the subject matter. Sometimes this amounted to works created with a specific epistemic purpose, such as maps or to artistic representations that remained faithful to the relative size and shapes of the depicted objects, but dazzled with the bold intentional application of paint and use of colour as in Vermeer's work. On other occasions however, the mechanicity of the initial recording process was met with the intentional manipulation of the scene by the artist, such as Canaletto, in order to create an idealized representation of reality. Therefore, the use of mechanical processes to depict a naturally-dependent subject need not preclude artists from imaginatively reinterpreting reality if this fulfils their artistic intentions. Analogously, using photographic technology gives artists the tools to straightforwardly document reality, imaginatively portray their visual experience of reality, or create imaginative representations based on naturally-dependent subjects.

## 4. Intentionality and Epistemic Value

Not all theorists have accepted that such values are contingent. Some theorists have raised concerns that we are entering a post-photographic era because it has been proposed that greater degrees of intentionality in digital photography are diminishing the epistemic value of the medium. As mentioned earlier, photographers are now able to manipulate every pixel of a digital photograph if they so wish. Consequently, theorists such as Savedoff have argued that 'the notion of a special authority now seems chained to the photography of the past, as digital tools move contemporary photography closer to the subjectivity of drawing and painting.' (2008, p111). Batchen has argued that digital processes have returned photography to the 'creative human hand' (1994, p48) and that 'whereas photography claims a spurious objectivity, digital imaging remains an *overtly* fictional process' (1994, p48).[9] In this section, I will address these concerns and as

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[9] Relatedly, Lefebvre has argued that 'once it becomes impossible to tell apart a photograph from a CGI the epistemic value we give photography may well change.' (2007, p15)

per my argument I will propose that increased intentionality does not necessarily lower epistemic value.

A lack of intentional input in the process of creating an image does not always result in the most epistemically valuable work. It is often the case in fact, that the intervention of an agent can enhance the epistemic value of a work, or at least our access to this epistemic value, depending upon the context of its dissemination and clear signposting of what processes have been used and to what effect (Frankel 2004). Without subjective intervention for instance, astronomical photographs that are usually made from RAW data files would be virtually unreadable. NASA among other space agencies rework their RAW images in order to research from them and also to educate the public with. They frequently make photographic compounds by combining images of the subject taken through different filters, to create a composite and comprehendible image. Contrast, and other values are adjusted in RAW images and often scientists will also assign colours to images that capture subjects beyond the visible light spectrum. This regulated manipulation enables us to see and understand phenomena that would otherwise be difficult or virtually impossible to read. This is a subjective decision that heightens not only the epistemic value, but also aesthetic value (Wilder 2009, p73, Chadwick 2016, p105).

The trust and value that we find in these images, is clearly highly dependent upon the context in which they are used. Within the sphere of science, we trust the truth and factual content of these images, and perhaps most significantly for our interests, scientists do not conceal the image processing techniques that they employ in order to create images. This is much the same in other professional image-making practices such as medical or archeological illustration, and illustrators within these spheres are subject to strict guidelines (Benovsky 2011, p388). As Lopes points out, there are plenty of other knowledge-oriented image-making domains that are not photographic (2016, p112), but that are subject to stringent rules and reliable channels that convey epistemic value for specific purposes (Abell 2010, p85).[10] Such works may not conform to our common understanding of

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[10] 'Any image type used to perform an imaging task should be informative, where what counts as informativeness depends on the task at hand.' (Lopes 2009, p17).

visual information, but to experts can be richer than the visual information contained in photographs. For instance, architectural or archeological lithic drawings (Lopes 2009, p13) have much higher epistemic value than many other manugraphs (Lopes 2009, p22). This mode of selective and interpretative illustration has been described as "scientific realism" (Moser 2014, p62). It is not the case that illustrators are taking on imaginative liberties or presenting subjective viewpoints about the depicted subjects but using the drawings to make valuable inferences about the subjects (Mosser 2014, p75-6). Hence, intentionality does not preclude epistemic value.

Such examples show us that epistemic value is contingent and is not necessarily dependent upon whether a work possesses a mechanical or manugraphic etiology.[11] However, epistemic status appears to be fixed in the minds of average viewers.[12] For instance, whilst it is widely known that there are many photographic domains in which post-production is standard, such as advertising, viewers still take offence to images that appear to be taken from reality (Levin 2009, p331). This may be because there does not appear to be a standard of what constitutes acceptable manipulation within fields like advertising or fashion photography, whilst in photojournalism and wildlife photography, 'the prohibition of manipulation and staging is well known.' (Bátori 2016, p82) Whilst intentional control has increased in some respects, despite some theorists such as Savedoff (1997, p211) decreeing manipulation to be standard in digital photographic practice, it is not prescriptive that the digital photographer must carry out this practice.

There can be incredibly low levels of human intervention in the processing of an image due to the increased potential for mechanization that has accompanied technological advances. However, as with analogue photography, intentional control is variable in digital photography

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[11] A view that has also been expressed by Lopes: 'The proposal is that neither is inherently epistemic or aesthetic, both are made so by norms in social practices.' (2016, p112)

[12] According to Cohen and Meskin (2004) viewers have a fixed idea of epistemic value in relation to mechanicity, and this may be contributing to the persistent belief that a mechanical etiology suppresses artistic agency. The rationale behind this is that mechanically formed images are objective, because they lack agential input in the mapping of the image (Walden 2005).

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(Chadwick 2016, p111). Just as not all photographers working in the early experimental period of analogue photography would manipulate their negatives or retouch their positives, not all digital photographers will manipulate their images (Morris 2011, p45-46). The potential to manipulate photographs has almost always been possible, what has changed is the potential degree of intentional control that digitalization offers, but this does not signal the end of photography, nor the potential epistemic qualities of the medium.

## 5. Conclusion

There is no justification for the orthodox theorists to hold a sharp-divide between aesthetic and epistemic values based upon whether an image has a mechanical and manugraphic etiology. Aesthetic value is not fixed based upon whether a work is typified as mechanical or manugraphic, but how mechanical or manugraphic processes are used, very often together, to achieve specific pictorial aims. This conclusion is not intended to eradicate the important distinctions between the specific qualities of painting or photography but rather is intended to help us gain a greater understanding of how artists utilize image-generating processes in order to fulfil their artistic intentions. Therefore, a mechanistic etiology does not necessarily reduce artistic agency. Furthermore, epistemic value is contingent and compatible with intentional processes. Concerns arising as a result of the increased intentional control available to digital photographers are unfounded, as strict guidelines are still in place within knowledge domains that ensures the epistemic value of images.

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