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Factive Pictorial Experience and Indexical Drawing

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ABSTRACT. This paper presents a counterexample to Robert Hopkins's argument that handmade pictures cannot sustain factive pictorial experience. I argue that some drawings are indexical and that such drawings have the same capacity as photography to sustain pictorial experiences that are factive. This example also counts against other efforts that use the joint iconicity and indexicality of photography to distinguish photographs from handmade images.

1. Factive Seeing-in

Robert Hopkins argues that traditional photography that uses photosensitive film and "the accompanying techniques for developing, printing or projecting images" does not only "offer us a way of finding out about the world that is more secure than that offered by handmade pictures" (2012, p. 709). It is also the case that "this epistemological difference is accompanied by a difference in phenomenology: we experience photographs differently from other pictures" (ibid.). When traditional photography works as it should, it sustains a special kind of seeing-in that is factive. By this Hopkins does not mean that we see the facts that a photograph records. Rather, he

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means that we see that the facts obtained when the photograph recorded them. When photography works as it should, it is the case that:

If S sees in P that p, then p (ibid., p. 713).

For a pictorial experience to be factive in this sense, it must do more than capture the facts, Hopkins argues. The experience must capture the facts as a matter of necessity so that "its accuracy is guaranteed" (ibid., p. 711). Few images seem to guarantee such accuracy. According to Hopkins, however, traditional photography is guaranteed to be accurate, since the causal process it employs is information-preserving. Photographs produced using photosensitive film and the accompanying techniques for developing, printing or projecting images are the result of a multi-stage process that functions to register, fixate, and display information about the world. When this process works as it should, later stages of the process contain the same information as earlier stages and no new information is introduced after the first stage (ibid., p. 714).

It is not an incidental feature that traditional photography is information preserving, Hopkins argues. Traditional photography preserves information because it is "designed to produce factive seeing-in" (ibid., p. 716). Given this general aim, every element of the causal chain is governed by norms of proper functioning that define "what it is for that element to function properly" (ibid., p. 717). For example, the shutter speed works properly when it is adjusted relative to the light and aperture "so as to let in the right amount of light to form a differentiated pattern on the film" (ibid., p. 716). The focus works properly when it is tuned so that the "light rays coming from a single point on the photographed object converge at a single point on the film" (ibid., p. 717).

Similarly, the film is developed properly when it is exposed to developing chemicals "for long enough to best preserve the differentiated pattern formed on the exposed film" (ibid.). Taken together, these and other norms make up an information-preserving system designed to produce factive seeing-in. It is from this overarching aim that each norm inherits its point. Importantly, however, the norms are not trivial, since it is possible to formulate each norm independently without referring to the general aim of getting things right (ibid.).

Hopkins denies that handmade pictures offer the same epistemic benefits as traditional photography. The reason is not that handmade pictures cannot capture facts accurately. Many realistic paintings, drawings, and prints are proof of the contrary. The issue, according to Hopkins, is that there is no guarantee that a handmade picture will capture the facts accurately. Because handmade pictures reflect how the picture-maker takes things to be, handmade pictures are "always vulnerable to error whether or not they succumb to it" (ibid., p. 715).

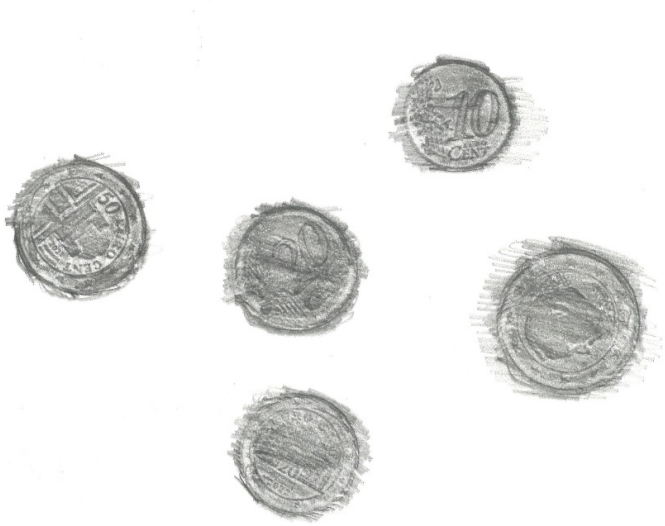
The vulnerability to error that the artist's take on the world introduces is incompatible with factivity as it is characterized by Hopkins. Furthermore, Hopkins argues that it is not possible to shore up this vulnerability by articulating norms of proper functioning for handmade pictures. Such norms would still have to be followed by the maker of the picture. The vulnerability to error would remain, since "information from the object portrayed can only reach the viewer via the artist's take on the world." (ibid., p. 720). Secondly, any norms enjoining the artist to "draw things as he sees them to be" are trivial, since they invoke the very facts the accurate capture of which the norms are supposed to guarantee (ibid., p. 721). According to Hopkins, it follows that our experience of handmade pictures cannot be factive and that it therefore is "not itself epistemologically valuable as experience of photographs is" (ibid.).

2. Indexical Drawing

The success of Hopkins's argument depends on what kinds of handmade pictures are compared with photography. His claim that only traditional photography sustains factive seeing-in is plausible when photography is compared with common handmade pictures such as figure drawings and still-life paintings. There are, however, convincing counterexamples which undermine Hopkins's claim that no handmade pictures sustain factive seeing-in. Such examples can be found because the indexical quality that grounds the epistemic power of photography is not a feature that is unique to photographs. There are also handmade pictures that are indexical.

One example of a handmade picture that is also indexical is a drawing made using the technique of frottage where a textured surface is depicted by rubbing a paper placed over the

surface with a soft pencil or other drawing material.[5] Frottage drawings have both of the main qualities that Hopkins claims for traditional photography. They offer us a secure way of finding out about the world, and this epistemological difference is arguably accompanied by a difference in how we experience them (cf. Hopkins, 2012, p. 709). Yet, frottage drawings are not photographic images made with the help of light-sensitive materials. They are handmade imprints made by marking paper while it is in physical contact with a textured surface.



The above figure represents a drawing that supplied a secure way of finding out about the world. To limit my knowledge about what I was drawing, I asked a collaborator to place some coins under a sheet of paper while I looked away. Before making the drawing, I was therefore ignorant about how many coins there were, what currency they were, which side faced up, how the coins were rotated, and how they were placed relative to one another. Making the drawing produced knowledge about these and many other features. The drawing revealed that there were five coins, that four were tails up, that they were Euros, and so on. When the drawing was complete, I was able to verify these findings by lifting the paper and looking at the coins themselves.

The coin example shows that frottage has the same epistemic merits that Hopkins claims for photography. The pictorial experience that it sustains has special epistemic value not only

[5] See Iversen (2020) for an art historical discussion and background.

because it is accurate. It is accurate as a matter of necessity. So long as a frottage is carried out correctly, it is *guaranteed* to be accurate regardless of what one takes oneself to be recording. Contrary to what Hopkins argues, it is not true that when pictures are made by hand "information from the object portrayed can only reach the viewer via the artist's take on the world" (*ibid.*: 720). A consequence of this is that it is not only photography that supports factive seeing-in. Frottage too enables one to see what facts obtained when it was made. When frottage works as it should, it is the case that:

If S sees in F that *p*, then *p*

The coin example is of course a construed example designed to make a theoretical point. In most contexts of inquiry, the informativeness of frottage is not very salient. Plain observation is usually a much more efficient way of finding out about the world. That does, however, not entail that the epistemic merits that the example highlights are not genuine. Nor does it entail that they have no practical application. There are several contexts of inquiry in which frottage is useful because it preserves information. Notably, frottage was long an important instrument in the archeological study of petroglyphic rock art and is still used to some extent today.[6]

When frottage is used in a scientific context, it is employed with the same general aim as traditional photography: to enable accurate seeing-in. Several norms must be obeyed to achieve this aim. One must apply a certain pressure with the pencil. The paper must not be so thick that it does not adjust to the textured surface underneath it. The pencil must be soft enough to deposit enough graphite. One must shade out all the areas to be documented. The sheet of paper must be still during the making of the drawing. The object underneath the sheet must not move, and so on.[7]

All the above norms serve the general aim of accurate seeing-in. As with traditional photography, however, the norms can be formulated independently without mentioning the general

[6] See e.g. Horn et al. (2018).
[7] When frottage is used for artistic purposes, it frequently violates one or more of the above norms. For example, the surrealists would collate incongruent elements by moving their paper or placing new objects underneath it. Such a strategy is comparable to double exposure in photography which is another norm-breaking strategy frequently used by the surrealists. Cf. Walton (1984, pp. 267-269) and Hopkins (2012, p. 715).

aim of accurate seeing-in. In other words, the norms are nontrivial. They can be specified without invoking "the idea of getting the facts right". As such, the norms meet the triviality objection that Hopkins raises against attempts to show that handmade pictures can sustain factive seeing-in (2012, p. 720). Contrary to what Hopkins suggests, it is possible to identify norms for making pictures by hand that do not issue trivial instructions such as "draw things as you see them to be" (*ibid.*, p. 721). When these norms work in unison, they constitute a picturing technique which, like photography, is information-preserving.

3. Conclusion

Examples of indexical drawing show that if there is such a thing as factive seeing-in, it is not a way of seeing that is exclusive to photography. My argument does, however, not imply that frottage and photography are exactly akin. The two are different, since they are not indexical in the same way. Since frottage carries the imprint of surfaces which it has touched, its indexicality is of a *proximal* nature. By contrast, photography is *distally indexical*, since it registers light reflected from surfaces at a certain remove. Accordingly, there is a difference in the range of information that photography and frottage convey. Perhaps Hopkins's view can be restated with the help of these terms. Perhaps what is really special about traditional photography is that it sustains factive seeing-in of distal objects. Assessing this claim would require further investigation, however. Even if frottage only sustains factive seeing-in of proximal objects, it remains to be seen whether there are other classes of handmade images that sustain factive seeing-in of distal objects.

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