

Gettier and the Pyramids

Within established epistemology there is little room for the art object as knowledge, albeit with some concessions on the art object's ability to communicate knowledge; this is to point out its limited ability to do so, as Steven Scrivner states:

"This Knowledge is typically of a superficial nature and cannot account for the deep insights that art is usually thought to endow into emotions, human nature and relationships, and our place in the world" (2002: 1).

Objected Orientated Ontology (OOO) on the other hand, states the art object's aesthetic qualities can be an unjustified true belief (Harmon, 2018: 180) and there are echoes of constructivism in the way that OOO considers 'reading' the world via these indirect means. If the unjustified art object can lead to a justified true belief in the traditional sense, then surely it can be knowledge if eventually reaching the same conclusion. Therefore, this paper will aim to discuss that the art object, or specifically the photograph can be a form of knowledge as supported by an OOO approach, albeit a partial knowledge

The idea of justified truth in the photograph as one example of an art object has been discussed frequently since its inception; it has an illusory evidential authority unlike other pictorial mediums, where Roland Barthes notes: *"I can never deny that the thing has been there"* (1993: 76), and Susan Sontag equates photography to the allegory of Plato's cave (1979: 3-24), which only reveal partial reality to us but even now the naturalistic qualities of the medium remain an addictive presence. Should this matter? OOO informs us that knowledge shouldn't necessarily directly access reality (Harmon, 2018: 168), which suggests justified true beliefs can be formed from the surface level of photographs.

Consider then, a photograph of a pyramid that you might find in a magazine, as to acknowledge that images are primarily consumed within a similar context, and one that would be described by Vilém Flusser as the *'technical image'* (2000: 14) as to 'prove' the existence of the object. Additionally, you may not have seen it in person before in order to verify the object. You put trust in the information that is available; here is an image of the object, here is a caption under the image telling you what the object is, here it is printed on the pages of a magazine authored by someone who is presumed knowledgeable about the object. With this available evidence, it would be reasonable to assume that Pyramids do exist and a justified true belief is formed.

National Geographic ran such a cover in 1982, but fundamentally digitally altered the position of the pyramids situated in Giza (Goldberg, 2016) creating a composite of the original and for the average reader would have been justification enough for the existence of the pyramids (Figure 1). Though not strictly a textbook, National Geographic is revered empirically by many, leading to widespread outrage at the very notion of such an edit to create a more aesthetically pleasing cover, but does this matter? The edited image is essentially a composite of reality that moved existent elements to better fit the format of the cover. To a purist, it would be hard to justify such a concept, which levee the accusation of slippery slopes of misleading representation of subjects providing false interpretations of our reality. The assessment might be accurate, yet if you had never seen or visited the pyramids before, the image could still justify a fundamental true

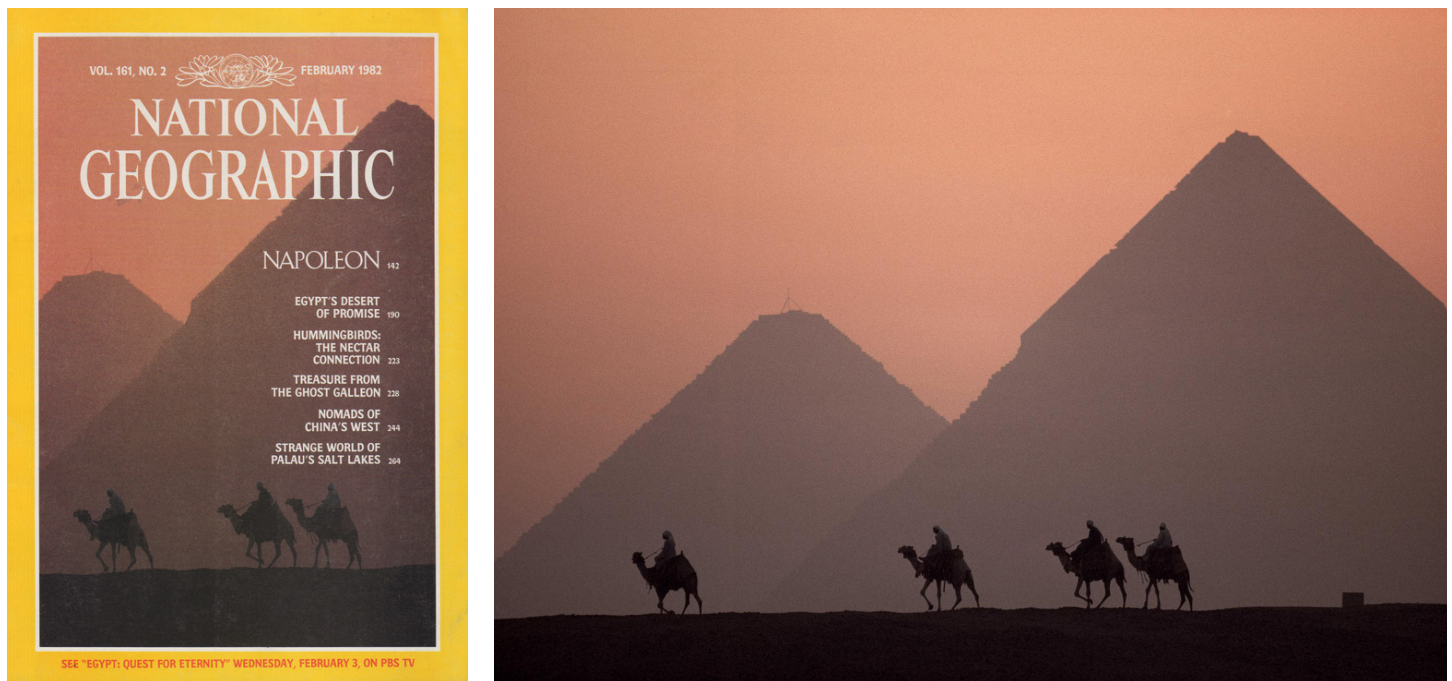


Figure 1: Gordon Gahon & National Geographic (1982) 'Pyramids of Giza, Egypt' on the cover of February 1982 National Geographic [left] and Gahon's unedited original image [right].

belief, which could be considered knowledge of the existence of the pyramids but this knowledge is based on a false premise, better known as 'The Gettier Problem' (1963: 121-123). If applied to the photograph, which are frequently used as a justification for truth, then subsequently the knowledge formed can become problematic.

Each of the Gettier cases show us that a justified true belief can come to the same conclusion as knowledge. However, this is coincidence, akin to guessing the correct answer to a 50/50 question; This knowledge is based on a justified true belief but there is a flaw for that justification. Despite being a computational edit of the pyramids of Giza, the representation still validates a true belief through the communication of the pictorial as even Scrivener acknowledges: *"to take a representation as knowledge we have to recognise an intention to communicate knowledge"* (2002: 7); the belief that pyramids exist is justified and it is also true, even if you have never seen them in reality. Although, the belief that they exist as pictured is categorically incorrect.

Photography primarily communicates, but not all photographs are knowledge and never pretend to be. However, if some can be thought of as a Gettier case, then potentially others can also be knowledge. Therefore, a spectrum might be drawn between indexical and abstraction, knowledge and mere aesthetics. So, what if the image used to justify this belief was non-lens based laser scans of the same pyramid, just as was constructed by the Vienna Institute for Archaeological Science (Neubauer & Studnicka, 2014). Though you might look at this example and not be fooled by the image presented, owing to its fairly obvious origins as a computer render, it is arguably more accurate than a photograph created from reflected light and the conclusion is still a belief in the existence of the pyramids (having never visited them), after all it is at least a scan formed from the structure and concrete (limestone?) reality of the ancient artefacts. As technology advances, it would be conceivable that entirely non-lens based photorealistic renders of the pyramids could

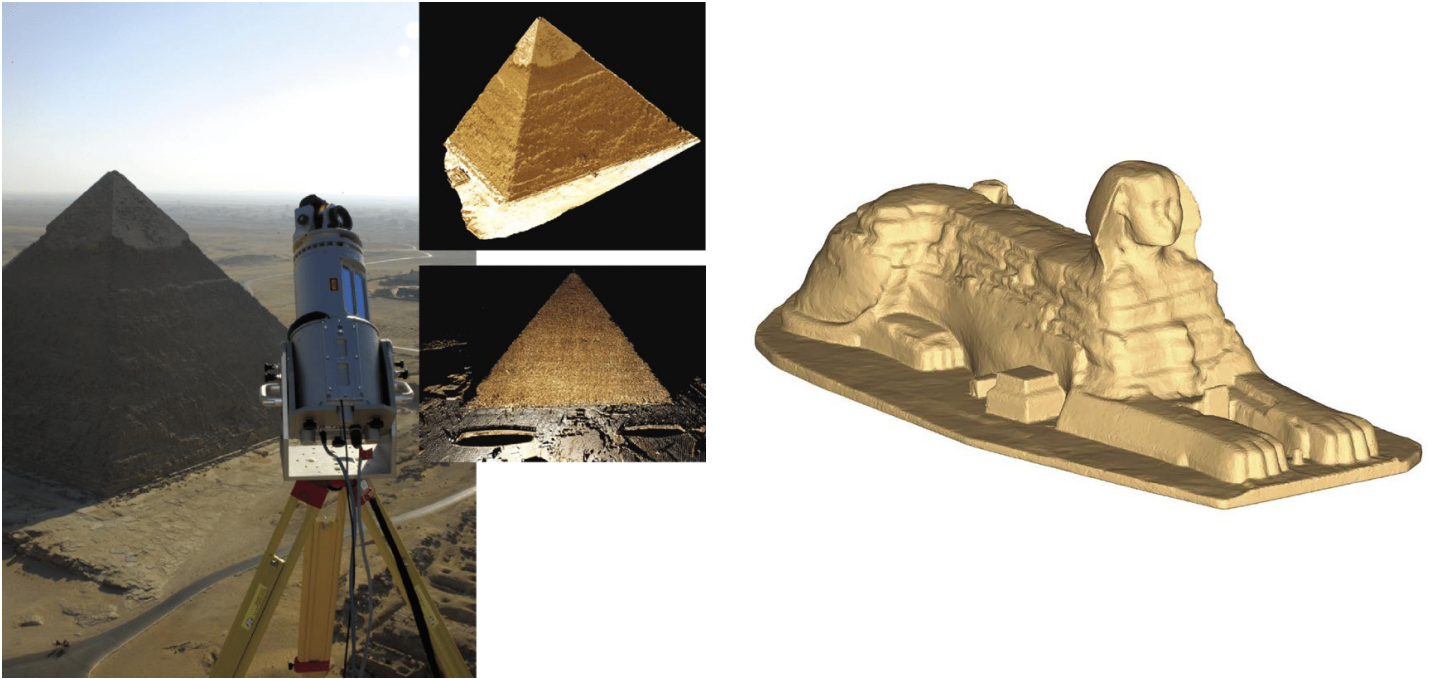


Figure 2: Nikolas Studnicka et al (2014) Single scan from the north and east front of the Chepren Pyramid visualised in RiSCAN PRO 1.1.2 as coloured point cloud scanned from top of the Cheops pyramid [left] & Triangulated point cloud of the Sphinx combined from 7 scanner positions: 6 from the ground and one from the Cheops Pyramid, triangulated and textured in RiSCAN PRO 1.1.2

become common practice just as it is for advertising pre-production CGI representations of cars (Matousek, 2019) to prove the existence of the object, or grounds to purchase the object.

The photograph is also an expression of the human centric world. By pointing a camera at the object we impose an interpretation of that object by converting it into time and light and then recording this impression; historically onto the light sensitive material, and now more commonly onto the sensor of the digital camera - the representation is now coded by the means in which it has been captured. It is easy to see a misrepresentation of reality from the digital manipulation and composite of the 1982 pyramid image. However, what about the choice of different film stocks? What about the nostalgic Kodachrome versus its Fuji equivalent? Each of the constituent ingredients in the film creates an aesthetic synonymous with the brand, which Flusser also notes:

“The green of a photographed field, for example, is an image of the concept ‘green’, just as it occurs in chemical theory, and the camera (or rather the film inserted into it) is programmed to translate this concept into the image” (2000: 43).

And the same of course exists in the digital camera, with each branded sensor programmed to resolve these concepts according to its own programmed aesthetic values: creating agency for the object creating the image with qualities of its own, based on human decisions made much earlier than when the photographer makes theirs. The emphasis has shifted to the programmer over even the operator of the camera; although we possess the device, we license the software that powers it, relinquishing control of operations that create the final image supporting Flusser’s assertion in his philosophy of photography: *“Power has moved from the owner of objects to the programmer and the operator” (2000: 30).* These differences ultimately make a

subtle impact on how the image is being perceived by the reader and even over authorship at a base level – is it the photographer, or the software who controls the result?

The representation of objects is tied to our interpretation of them exacerbated by advances of technology, which also introduce a range of non-human actors controlling these interpretations of reality and we will place even more trust in justifications made via computational means. Graham Harmon reminds us that “the external world exists independently of human awareness” (2018: 10) and is crucial when considering any interpretation that has been based in the materialist model, which in itself has been shaped by the idealistic views put forward by constructivism and poststructuralists.

On the one hand it, it doesn't have to matter that a justification is made from a non-indexical, yet iconic pictorial. The object will exist regardless of if the justification is flawed. However, when utilising the Gettier problem, we are presented with another way to challenge the relationship of inherent authority in the pictorial. It also is a way to enter OOO as part of the discursive approach to art practice to move beyond the traditional forms of discussions around the pictorial. OOO acknowledges that there are no two identical perceptions of the object (Harmon, 2018: 155), just as two individuals might have different interpretations of then pictorial image. Yet, an interpretation and perception of the object is still only a representation; even if this sits on the indexical side of this spectrum, it may still be a valid justification of the true belief, albeit a speculative one.

OOO also creates a space to consider the pictorial as an object and as an actor playing its role in the overall interpretation. The photograph's naturalistic qualities allow it to be mistaken for a proof of materialism when its actuality merely is only part of this process. As new technology takes the place of light entering the camera as the primary way we represent the concrete world, it is fundamental to consider that a true belief justified using a photograph exists on a spectrum of its ability to represent. A photograph is unable to articulate the intricacy needed to be fully representative of the objects it depicts as this would require a tangible connection to the world it is already once removed from. This creates opportunity for that justification to get interrupted and nudged towards a particular bias and interpretation leading to its dismissal as knowledge.

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