

# Optimal sampling of visual information for lightness judgments

Matteo Toscani, Matteo Valsecchi, and Karl R. Gegenfurtner<sup>1</sup>

Department of Psychology, Justus Liebig University Giessen, D-35394 Giessen, Germany

Edited by Edward Adelson, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, and approved May 20, 2013 (received for review October 1, 2012)

**The variable resolution and limited processing capacity of the human visual system requires us to sample the world with eye movements and attentive processes. Here we show that where observers look can strongly modulate their reports of simple surface attributes, such as lightness. When observers matched the color of natural objects they based their judgments on the brightest parts of the objects; at the same time, they tended to fixate points with above-average luminance. When we forced participants to fixate a specific point on the object using a gaze-contingent display setup, the matched lightness was higher when observers fixated bright regions. This finding indicates a causal link between the luminance of the fixated region and the lightness match for the whole object. Simulations with rendered physical lighting show that higher values in an object's luminance distribution are particularly informative about reflectance. This sampling strategy is an efficient and simple heuristic for the visual system to achieve accurate and invariant judgments of lightness.**

lightness constancy | lightness perception | visual perception | attention

Judging the lightness of visual stimuli has been studied for centuries, since the original investigations by Weber (1) and Fechner (2). The light reaching the eye is the product of the illumination and the reflectance of the object, and also depends on the scene geometry (3). However, only the proportion of reflected light is an invariant property of the object and thus of great importance for vision. There are several well-established factors that support lightness constancy in the face of these challenges. On the one hand, lateral inhibition between retinal neurons filters out shallow intensity gradients, which are mostly caused by illumination effects (4, 5). On the other hand, more complex factors also have an effect on lightness perception, such as object shape (6–9) or the interpretation of transparent surfaces (10, 11). However, eye movements have been almost completely neglected so far, even though a general influence of viewing behavior has been shown for some color constancy tasks (12–15). This finding is surprising because the visual system needs to sample the local properties of objects and this is accomplished by moving the eyes and the focus of spatial attention around. Because visual acuity, luminance sensitivity, contrast sensitivity, and color sensitivity change with retinal eccentricity (16–18), our visual system has to stitch together its representation of the world from many small samples to analyze the visual scene in detail. Peripheral vision is not only characterized by poor resolution, but also the appearance of basic visual features—like spatial frequency, luminance, or chromatic saturation—is distorted in the periphery of the visual field (19–22). Eye movements may then be used to select relevant information, even for stimuli that are above threshold in peripheral vision. We investigated whether the distribution of fixations on an object has an effect on its apparent lightness. For surfaces made of a single material, the reflected light varies with the illuminant and its interactions with the surface's geometry, whereas the reflectance is a property of the material. To judge the lightness of an object, defined as its apparent reflectance (23), the visual system has to select a single value from a whole distribution of local luminance values across the whole object. We therefore tested the hypothesis of a link between the local information

sampled from individual fixations and the apparent lightness of an object.

First, we show that observers tend to take heavily into account the brighter parts of objects when they are asked to match the color or lightness of these objects. Second, we show that observers tend to fixate on the brighter parts of the objects as they make their match. Third, we show that this link between fixations and lightness perception is causal. When we forced the observers to look at particular points on the objects, their lightness impressions changed according to the luminance of the fixated regions. Fourth, we show that eye fixations and attention both contribute to this effect. Fifth, we show that the brighter parts of objects are particularly diagnostic of the object's reflectance.

## Results

Observers had to adjust the color of a small patch of light to match the color of one of several real objects presented to them, as illustrated in Fig. 1 *A* and *B*. The luminance adjusted by the observers was significantly higher than the mean luminance of the light being reflected from the object into the eye ( $t_5 = 11.6084$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). In fact, the matches closely correspond to the brightest parts of the objects. This finding indicates that the brighter regions of the objects are weighted more heavily. Fig. 2 shows the observers' average lightness matches together with samples of the same object (a paper cone) under different illumination conditions. The match is quite similar to the brightest parts of the cone and a piece of paper cut out from the cone, such that it is oriented perpendicular to the light source, maximizing its luminance. The piece of paper cut out from the cone, mounted at the location of the matching box, appears much darker than the cone, because the surface of the computer monitor was oriented nearly parallel to the light source. Observers are known to be far from perfect in taking such geometrical aspects into account (24). The match is also much brighter than the mean luminance across the whole object, which raises the question as to why observers match the brightest parts of the objects, and whether this strategy is of advantage.

**Role of Eye Fixations.** We explored a possible role of eye movements by measuring the fixation locations on the objects (Fig. 3*A*). Fig. 3*B* shows histograms of the luminance distributions across the objects together with a luminance histogram of the fixated regions. Even though the object luminance histograms are typically skewed toward darker values, the luminance distributions associated with fixations are centered on values higher than the median. Binomial tests performed for each object revealed that the proportions of fixations on brighter points than the median were significantly higher than chance (all  $P$ s  $< 0.001$ ). To investigate the relationship

Author contributions: M.T., M.V., and K.R.G. designed research; M.T. and M.V. performed research; M.T. and M.V. analyzed data; and M.T., M.V., and K.R.G. wrote the paper.

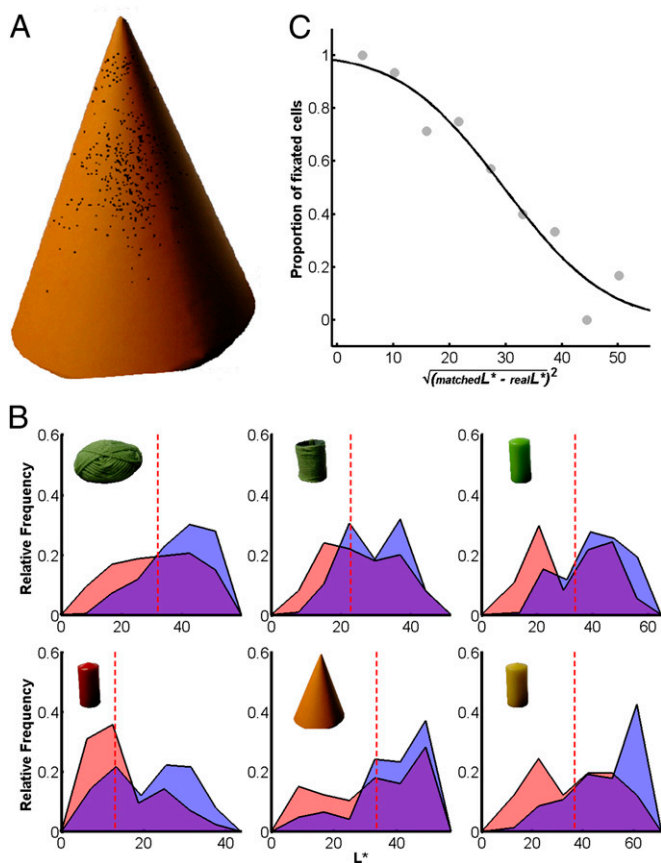
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission.

<sup>1</sup>To whom correspondence should be addressed. E-mail: Karl.R.Gegenfurtner@psychol.uni-giessen.de.

This article contains supporting information online at [www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1216954110/-DCSupplemental](http://www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1216954110/-DCSupplemental).



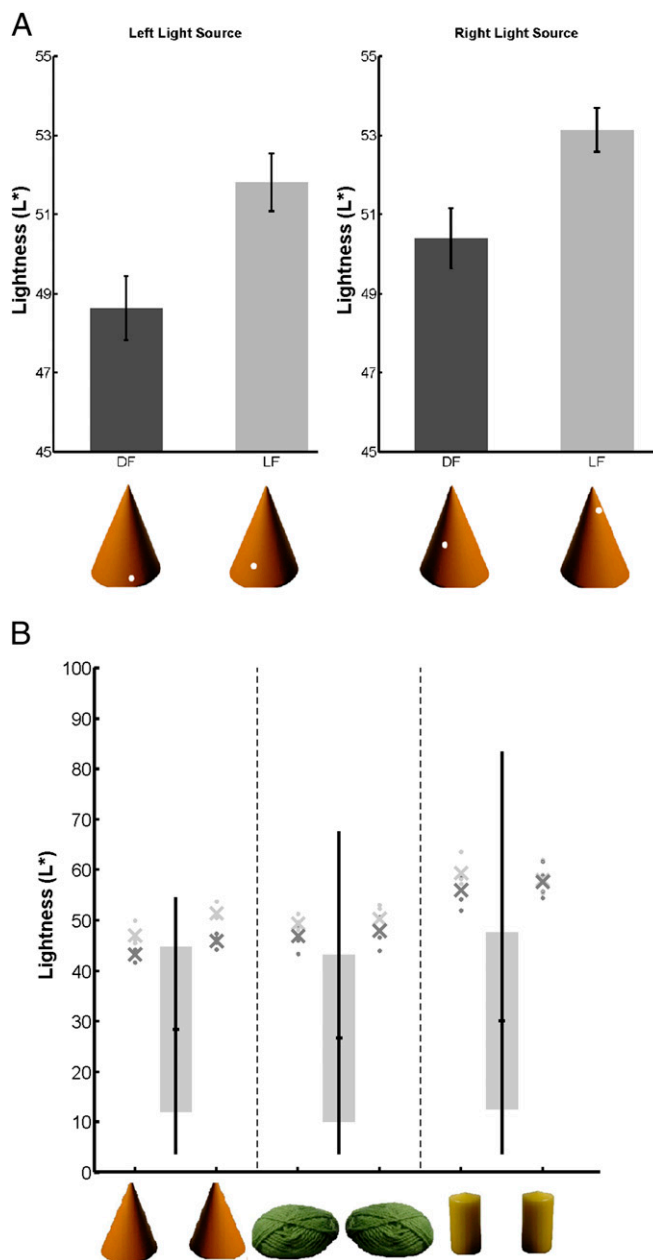


**Fig. 3.** (A) Example of fixations on an object (orange paper cone) during the color-matching task. Fixations falling outside the object area are not shown. (B) Relative frequencies of fixations and lightness ( $L^*$ ) for the six objects. The red histogram depicts the  $L^*$  distribution within the object area, with the vertical dashed line indicating its median. The blue histogram depicts the distribution of the  $L^*$  values associated with fixations (pooled across all observers). (C) Probability of fixation as a function of distance from the matched color for all spectral matrix cells. This example refers to one object and one observer. The example represents the probability for a cell to be fixated at least once, as a function of the difference between the matched and the spectrally measured  $L^*$  for the given cell. Symbols represent the proportion of fixated points in ten bins.

difference between the fixated bright and dark regions. Furthermore, the matches had a considerably higher luminance than the fixated regions. To bring even more clarity to this issue, we designed a control experiment where we explicitly asked our observers to perform a lightness match (25). Pictures of the objects were presented on a computer screen and the observers used real grayscale paper chips illuminated by a light bulb to select their matches (shown in Fig. S4). The observers had to “pick the chip made of the same material as the object.” The presence of two light fields and the explicit paper-matching task are designed to induce the observers to perform the task in terms of lightness (25). Observers chose chips with higher reflectance when they were asked to fixate the bright regions (Text S3 and Fig. S5). Under such viewing conditions, photometric luminance is typically not perceptually accessible and perceived brightness heavily depends on the context (26, 27). We confirmed this result by asking three observers to sort the chips in terms of the brightness and the lightness of their paint. Observers were not able to distinguish between brightness and lightness (Text S3) and in the cases where luminance and reflectance were dissociated, the observers’ judgments were determined by reflectance rather than luminance (Fig.

S5). Therefore, we are highly confident that our observers based their judgments on lightness in these experiments.

These results point to a direct causal link between the way an object is sampled through eye movements and its perceived overall lightness. Observers tend to produce estimates of the global lightness of objects that are above the physical average of the light intensities reaching the eyes and close to the brightest object regions. Interestingly, we observed that the



**Fig. 4.** (A) Lightness matches in the LF and in the DF condition: means and SEs of the matches. (Left) Data for images with a light gradient from the left side to the right; (Right) data for images with the opposite gradient. Black vertical bars represent the SEs. The four pictures at the bottom represent examples of the stimuli with the white dot indicating the fixated area. (B) Dark gray and light gray circles represent the mean object matches from each of the six observers, respectively, in the DF and in the LF condition. Dark and light crosses represent the mean matches for each object averaged across the observers, respectively, in the DF and LF condition. The gray bars represent the mean  $\pm 1$  SD and the black vertical lines represent the range of the distribution of  $L^*$  within the objects. Matches are always within the ranges.





**Eye-Movement Recording.** Gaze position signals were recorded with a head-mounted, video-based eye tracker (EyeLink II; SR Research) and were sampled at 500 Hz. Observers viewed the display binocularly but only the right eye was sampled. The eye tracker was calibrated at the beginning of each session. At the beginning of each trial the calibration was checked. If the error was more than 1.5° of visual angle a new calibration was performed; otherwise, a simple drift correction was applied. A calibration was accepted only if the validation procedure revealed a mean error smaller than 0.4° of visual angle.

**Attention Experiment.** To investigate the potential role of covert spatial attention, we repeated the forced fixation experiment with gray-scale images. Visual covert attention was either coherently located at fixation or shifted to the point with opposite luminance. Observers performed a demanding rapid serial visual presentation (RSVP) letter-detection task at the attended location, which extended throughout the presentation of the object (3 s). Observers reported how many characters appeared in the attended location, while keeping fixation. After the stimulus disappeared, they first reported whether the lightness of a comparison disk was higher or lower than that of the cone. The lightness of the disk was controlled adaptively. Subsequently, observers reported the number of targets. The RSVP was adjusted individually to ensure 50% performance in central and peripheral viewing, respectively. For each observer we computed points of subjectively equal lightness for all four conditions (all combinations of dark/light fixation and dark/light attention) by fitting cumulative Gaussians to the lightness judgment data.

**Simulation.** For each object, we obtained 800 views combining eight equally spaced rotations of the light field on the equator plane and 100 random rotations of the object in 3D. We used an illumination map captured photographically from a real world scene (49) and three couples of reflectances

to compare in the ROC analysis: {0.1670, 0.2330}, {0.4670, 0.5330}, {0.7670, 0.8330}. Only the reflectance and radiance at a wavelength of 570 nm were rendered and analyzed. Surfaces have been specified as perfectly Lambertian. For each object and each point of view, the luminance distributions were analyzed separately. Each distribution includes 100 object rotation samples. We computed the mean radiance of the pixels in each percentile. For each of the three pairs of reflectances, for each of the six objects, for each of the eight light field rotations, and for each percentile we performed a ROC analysis. We thus had 144 AUCs for each percentile. We aggregated these data in a cumulative AUC (37): namely, for each percentile we traced the function relating each possible value of AUC to the proportion of the classification performances above this value. The integral of this curve, called cumulative AUC, is an index of the classification performance (37). With this method we were able to aggregate data from several ROC curves, obtaining a single index of discriminability for each percentile.

**Observers.** Six naive observers took part in the free-viewing experiment, four in the forced-fixation experiment, and 12 in the covert-attention experiment. All of the observers were paid undergraduate students. All observers provided written informed consent. The study was approved by the local ethics committee LEK FB06 at Giessen University (2009-0008). All observers had normal or corrected-to-normal vision and normal color vision as tested with Ishihara plates (50).

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.** We thank Roland Fleming, Bart Anderson, and Qasim Zaidi for helpful discussions and comments. This work was supported by the German Research Foundation Reinhardt-Koselleck Project Grant GE 879/9 "Perception of material properties."

- Weber EH (1834) *De Pulsu, resorptione, auditu et tactu: Annotationes anatomicae et physiologicae* [On Heartbeat, Digestion, Audition and Touch: Anatomical and Physiological Comments](CF Koehler, Leipzig). Latin.
- Fechner G (1859) Über ein wichtiges psychophysisches Grundgesetz und dessen Beziehung zur Schätzung der Sterngrößen. *Sächs Abhandl* 4:455–532.
- Adelson EH, Pentland AP (1996) *Perception as Bayesian Inference*, eds Knill D, Richards W (Cambridge University Press, New York), pp 409–423.
- Mach E (1868) Über die physiologische Wirkung räumlich verteilter Lichtreize [On the physiological effect of spatially distributed light stimuli]. *Wiener Sitzungsber Math-Naturwiss Cl Kaiserlichen Akad Wiss* 57:1–11. German.
- Cornsweet T (1966) *Visual Perception* (Academic, New York).
- Koffka K (1935) *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (Lund Humphries, London).
- Knill DC, Kersten D (1991) Apparent surface curvature affects lightness perception. *Nature* 351(6323):228–230.
- Mach E (1959) *The Analysis of Sensations* (New York, Dover).
- Bloj MG, Kersten D, Hurlbert AC (1999) Perception of three-dimensional shape influences colour perception through mutual illumination. *Nature* 402(6764):877–879.
- Adelson E (2000) *The New Cognitive Neurosciences*, ed Gazzaniga M (MIT Press, Cambridge), pp 339–351.
- Anderson BL, Winawer J (2005) Image segmentation and lightness perception. *Nature* 434(7029):79–83.
- Granzier JJM, Toscani M, Gegenfurtner KR (2012) Role of eye movements in chromatic induction. *J Opt Soc Am A Opt Image Sci Vis* 29(2):A353–A365.
- Cornelissen B (1991) *Channels in the Visual Nervous System*, ed Blum EB (Freund, London), pp 109–123.
- Cornelissen FW, Brenner E (1995) Simultaneous colour constancy revisited: An analysis of viewing strategies. *Vision Res* 35(17):2431–2448.
- Golz J (2010) Colour constancy: influence of viewing behaviour on grey settings. *Perception* 39(5):606–619.
- Weale RA (1953) Spectral sensitivity and wave-length discrimination of the peripheral retina. *J Physiol* 119(2-3):170–190.
- Hansen T, Pracejus L, Gegenfurtner KR (2009) Color perception in the intermediate periphery of the visual field. *J Vis* 9(4):1–12.
- Virsu V, Rovamo J (1979) Visual resolution, contrast sensitivity, and the cortical magnification factor. *Exp Brain Res* 37(3):475–494.
- Davis ET, Yager D, Jones BJ (1987) Comparison of perceived spatial frequency between the fovea and the periphery. *J Opt Soc Am A* 4(8):1606–1611.
- Newsome LR (1972) Visual angle and apparent size of objects in peripheral vision. *Percept Psychophys* 12(3):300–304.
- Marks LE (1966) Brightness as a function of retinal locus. *Percept Psychophys* 1(10):335–341.
- Gordon J, Abramov I (1977) Color vision in the peripheral retina. II. Hue and saturation. *J Opt Soc Am* 67(2):202–207.
- Arend LE, Spehar B (1993) Lightness, brightness, and brightness contrast: 1. Illuminance variation. *Percept Psychophys* 54(4):446–456.
- Ripamonti C, et al. (2004) Measurements of the effect of surface slant on perceived lightness. *J Vis* 4(9):747–763.
- Arend L, Reeves A (1986) Simultaneous color constancy. *J Opt Soc Am A* 3(10):1743–1751.
- Robilotto R, Zaidi Q (2006) Lightness identification of patterned three-dimensional, real objects. *J Vis* 6(1):18–36.
- Zaidi Q (1999) *Color Vision: From Genes to Perception*, eds Gegenfurtner KR, Sharpe LT (Cambridge Univ Press, New York), pp 317–344.
- Findlay JM, Gilchrist ID (2003) *Active Vision: The Psychology of Looking and Seeing* (Oxford Univ Press, Oxford).
- Posner MI (1988) *Structures and Function of Selective Attention* (American Psychological Association, Washington, DC).
- Carrasco M, Ling S, Read S (2004) Attention alters appearance. *Nat Neurosci* 7(3):308–313.
- Deubel H, Schneider WX (1996) Saccade target selection and object recognition: Evidence for a common attentional mechanism. *Vision Res* 36(12):1827–1837.
- Kowler E, Anderson E, Doshier B, Blaser E (1995) The role of attention in the programming of saccades. *Vision Res* 35(13):1897–1916.
- Hoffman JE, Subramaniam B (1995) The role of visual attention in saccadic eye movements. *Percept Psychophys* 57(6):787–795.
- Itti L, Koch C (2001) Computational modelling of visual attention. *Nat Rev Neurosci* 2(3):194–203.
- Lichtman DP, Xiao B, Brainard DH (2007) RenderToolbox Version 2. Available at <http://rendertoolbox.org>. Accessed June 6, 2013.
- Green DM, Swets JA (1966) *Signal Detection Theory and Psychophysics* (Wiley, New York).
- Sonego P, Kocsor A, Pongor S (2008) ROC analysis: Applications to the classification of biological sequences and 3D structures. *Brief Bioinform* 9(3):198–209.
- Hayhoe M, Ballard D (2005) Eye movements in natural behavior. *Trends Cogn Sci* 9(4):188–194.
- Ko HK, Poletti M, Rucci M (2010) Microsaccades precisely relocate gaze in a high visual acuity task. *Nat Neurosci* 13(12):1549–1553.
- Motoyoshi I, Nishida S, Sharan L, Adelson EH (2007) Image statistics and the perception of surface qualities. *Nature* 447(7141):206–209.
- Anderson BL, Kim J (2009) Image statistics do not explain the perception of gloss and lightness. *J Vis* 9(11):1–17.
- Gilchrist AL (1980) When does perceived lightness depend on perceived spatial arrangement? *Percept Psychophys* 28(6):527–538.
- Bloj MG, Hurlbert AC (2002) An empirical study of the traditional Mach card effect. *Perception* 31(2):233–246.
- Anderson BL (1997) A theory of illusory lightness and transparency in monocular and binocular images: The role of contour junctions. *Perception* 26(4):419–453.
- Johnston WM (2009) Color measurement in dentistry. *J Dent* 37(Suppl 1):e2–e6.
- Barrett DM, Beaulieu JC, Shewfelt R (2010) Color, flavor, texture, and nutritional quality of fresh-cut fruits and vegetables: Desirable levels, instrumental and sensory measurement, and the effects of processing. *Crit Rev Food Sci Nutr* 50(5):369–389.
- Gerrard WA (1989) The measurement of hair colour. *Int J Cosmet Sci* 11(2):97–101.
- CIE (1978) *Technical Report No. Supplement No. 2 of CIE Publ. No. 15 (E-1.3.1) 1971* (Bureau Central de la CIE, Paris).
- Debevec PE (1998) Rendering synthetic objects into real scenes: Bridging traditional and image-based graphics with global illumination and high dynamic range photography. *Proceedings of SIGGRAPH* 1998:189–198.
- Ishihara S (1973) *Ishihara's Test Chart for Colour Deficiency - 24 Plate Edition* (Kanehara Trading, Tokyo).