

# A Perceptual Measure of Illumination Estimation Error

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Abstract: The goal of color constancy is to keep colors invariant to illumination. An important group of color constancy methods are the global illumination estimation methods. Numerous such methods have been proposed and their accuracy is usually described by using statistical descriptors of illumination estimation angular error. In order to demonstrate some of their fallacies and shortages, a very simple learning-based global illumination estimation dummy method is designed for which the values of statistical descriptors of illumination estimation error can be interpreted in contradictory ways. To resolve the paradox, a new performance measures is proposed that focuses on perceptual difference between different illumination estimation errors. The effect of ground-truth illumination distribution of the benchmark datasets on method evaluation is also demonstrated.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Achieving color constancy means keeping image colors invariant to scene illumination (Ebner, 2007) that often alters them as shown in Fig. 1. This is important before further image processing processing and it is done in two steps: illumination estimation, which is the crucial step, and chromatic adaptation i.e. removing the illumination cast. In most cases for color constancy the following image  $f$  formation process with Lambertian assumption included is used:

$$f_c(\mathbf{x}) = \int_{\omega} I(\lambda, \mathbf{x}) R(\mathbf{x}, \lambda) \rho_c(\lambda) d\lambda \quad (1)$$

where  $c$  is a color channel,  $\mathbf{x}$  is a given image pixel,  $\lambda$  is the wavelength of the light,  $\omega$  is the visible spectrum,  $I(\lambda, \mathbf{x})$  is the spectral distribution of the light source,  $R(\mathbf{x}, \lambda)$  is the surface reflectance, and  $\rho_c(\lambda)$  is the camera sensitivity of the  $c$ -th color channel. Uniform illumination is often assumed and this leads to removing  $\mathbf{x}$  from  $I(\lambda, \mathbf{x})$ . Then the observed color of the light source  $\mathbf{e}$  is:

$$\mathbf{e} = \begin{pmatrix} e_R \\ e_G \\ e_B \end{pmatrix} = \int_{\omega} I(\lambda) \rho(\lambda) d\lambda. \quad (2)$$

Only the direction of  $\mathbf{e}$  is needed to perform chromatic adaptation. Because the values of  $I(\lambda)$  and  $\rho_c(\lambda)$  are often unknown, calculating  $\mathbf{e}$  is an ill-posed problem. It is solved by making assumptions, which has resulted in numerous color



Figure 1: The same scene (a) with and (b) without illumination color cast.

constancy methods that can be split in at least two groups. In the first group are low-level statistics-based methods like White-patch (WP) (Land, 1977) and its improved version (Banić and Lončarić, 2014b), Gray-world (GW) (Buchsbbaum, 1980), Shades-of-Gray (SoG) (Finlayson and Trezzi, 2004), Grey-Edge (1st and 2nd order (GE1 and GE2)) (Van De Weijer et al., 2007a), Weighted Gray-Edge (Gijssenij et al., 2012), Color Sparrow (CS) (Banić and Lončarić, 2013), Color Rabbit (CR) (Banić and Lončarić, 2014a), using color distribution (CD) (Cheng et al., 2014b). The second group is composed of learning-based methods like gamut mapping (pixel, edge, and intersection based - PG, EG, and IG) (Finlayson et al., 2006), using high-level visual information (HLVI) (Van De Weijer et al., 2007b), natural image statistics (NIS) (Gijssenij and Gevers, 2007), Bayesian learning (BL) (Gehler et al., 2008), spatio-spectral learning (maximum likelihood estimate (SL) and

with gen. prior (GP)) (Chakrabarti et al., 2012), exemplar-based learning (EB) (Joze and Drew, 2012), Color Cat (CC) (Banić and Lončarić, 2015).

Most digital cameras have color constancy implemented at the beginning of their image pipeline so it operates on raw linear images (Gijssen et al., 2011). The implemented illumination estimation method should be as precise and as fast as possible because of the digital cameras' limited computational power. To determine which of the methods that are fast enough should be used, accuracy comparison is conducted by comparing statistical descriptors of illumination estimation error. In this paper it is shown that the mostly used descriptors may be misleading in showing the methods' practical performance.

For the sake of demonstration, a learning-based global illumination estimation dummy method is designed in a way to make two of the mostly used error statistical descriptors give contradictory accounts on the method's accuracy. The contradiction is resolved through discussion and by proposing a new illumination estimation performance measure. It combines the good properties of some of the mostly used statistical descriptors and it takes the perceptual error into account. Additionally, the negative effect of faulty design of the benchmark datasets on comparison between different methods is also shown.

The paper is structured as follows: In Section II the illumination estimation evaluation for global illumination estimation methods is explained, in Section III the dummy method intended to show the evaluation shortages is described and tested, in Section IV the results are discussed, and in Section V a new illumination estimation performance measure is proposed.

## 2 ESTIMATION EVALUATION

### 2.1 Benchmark Datasets

The first thing required to conduct a global illumination estimation method testing is a benchmark dataset. Such dataset contains images and their ground-truth illumination. The ground-truth illumination is usually extracted by placing a calibration object into the scene of each dataset image. The color of the achromatic surface of the calibration object e.g. gray patches or gray ball is then used as ground-truth illumination, which is provided together with the images. Some of the color constancy datasets are the GreyBall (Ciurea and Funt, 2003), the ColorChecker (Gehler et al., 2008) and its re-processed linear version (L. Shi, 2014), the NUS datasets (Cheng et al., 2014b). The

GreyBall dataset contains 11346 non-linear images, which were taken from a video sequence. Very often its linear version is used and it is obtained by performing an approximate inverse gamma correction of the original images.

### 2.2 Error Description

Before a color constancy method is applied to an image, first the calibration object has to be masked out. When the illumination estimation is performed, the angle between it and the ground-truth illumination is calculated and it serves as the angular error. After this procedure is performed for all images of the dataset, all of the per image angular errors are described by means of statistical descriptors. Since the distribution of the angular errors is not symmetrical, the most used descriptor is the median of the angular error (Hordley and Finlayson, 2004). Some other useful descriptors include the mean and the trimean of the angular error. In many cases a method having a lower median angular error is considered to be better than some other method having a higher median angular error. Although other illumination estimation error measures exist e.g. different mathematical and perceptual distances, angular error is the most widely used error measure and it has a high correlation with the subjective measures (Gijssen et al., 2009). However, every objective error measure including angular error is only an approximation of the perceived error because the human vision color constancy is incomplete and scene dependent.

## 3 THE DUMMY METHOD

### 3.1 Motivation

The reason for introducing a dummy method for global illumination estimation is to show the fallacies and shortages of the mostly used angular error statistical descriptors. Since assumptions are needed for illumination estimation methods, let's consider several facts and assumptions to show how foundations of the dummy method might hypothetically be reasoned.

The first one is that most common illuminations are daylight, sunlight, or some kind of incandescence. It has been shown that all of these have a spectrum that can be modelled by the black-body radiation (Judd et al., 1964) (Finlayson and Schaefer, 2001). Since assumptions are needed for the process of illumination estimation, the next step is to assume that some of the illuminations occur more often than the other. This assumption can be confirmed to some

degree by looking at the distribution of real-life illuminations by taking the ground-truth illuminations of illumination estimation benchmark datasets. Fig. 2 shows the chromaticities of ground-truth illumination of the Sony dataset (Cheng et al., 2014b). It can be seen that some regions of the chromaticity space are filled denser than the some other ones. This also holds for the remaining NUS datasets (Cheng et al., 2014b) and other datasets as well. Because it is evident that some illuminations are more probable to occur, this fact should be somehow used to obtain a better illumination estimation.

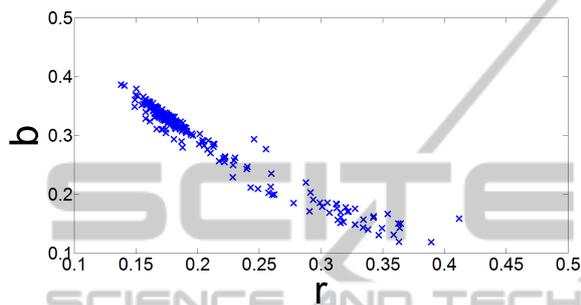


Figure 2: The  $rb$ -chromaticities of the Sony dataset (Cheng et al., 2014b) ground-truth illuminations.

### 3.2 Realization

Beside accuracy, computation speed is also considered in illumination estimation method design. In order to assure that the dummy method is fast, it is designed to assume that some illuminations occur more often and therefore to simply select one fixed illumination value, which is returned as illumination estimation for every given image. This value is obtained in the learning process in which for each of the ground-truth illuminations from the learning set the angles between it and the rest of the learning set ground-truth illuminations are calculated. The illumination that results in angles with the lowest median angle is then selected to be the fixed value. If the assumption holds, then in the testing phase this value should produce a relatively good illumination for the majority of the images whose scenes are lit by the most often illuminations.

Since this dummy method always stubbornly gives the same illumination estimation, it is named Color Mule (CM) for the purpose of a simpler notation in the rest of the paper.

### 3.3 Experimental Results

Illumination estimation is widely applied in digital cameras at the beginning of the image processing pipeline on raw images (Gijssen et al., 2011) and

the image formation model used in Eq. (1) is linear. Therefore the NUS datasets with linear images were used. Each of these datasets contains images taken with a different camera. The well-known reprocessed linear version (L. Shi, 2014) of the original ColorChecker dataset (Gehler et al., 2008) was not used because in the majority of papers the black level was erroneously not subtracted from the images before the testing procedure (Lynch et al., 2013), which may lead to confusion when comparing the results of methods from different publications.

Since the dummy CM method is a learning-based one, it was tested by conducting a three-fold cross-validation on the benchmark datasets. Table 1 shows the angular error statistics for CM and other methods. The results for other methods were taken from (Cheng et al., 2014b) and (Cheng et al., 2014a). In terms of median angular error, which is the most important, CM outperforms all other methods on most of the datasets. However, its trimean and especially mean angular errors are far from being the best. Such disagreement between the most important angular error statistical descriptors opens the questions how to interpret these results.

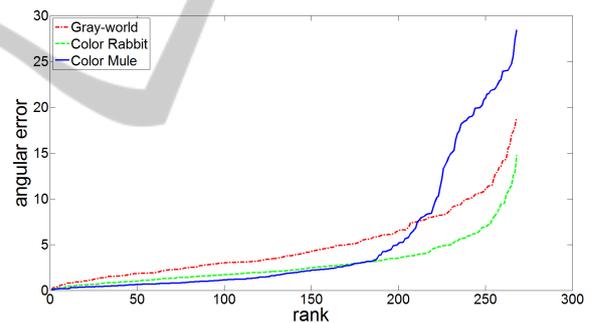


Figure 3: Comparison of sorted angular errors on the Sony dataset (Cheng et al., 2014b) for the Gray-world, Color Rabbit, and Color Mule.

## 4 DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Angular Error Distribution

When CM is excluded, then for 90% of all pairs composed of methods from Table 1 it holds that if the mean angular error of the pair's first method is greater than the mean angular error of the second method, then so is the median angular error and vice versa. On the other hand, when considering only pairs where one of the methods is CM, this holds for only 33% of them indicating a discrepancy between the mean and median.

The first step to resolve the paradox of contradict-

Table 1: Angular error of selected low-level statistics-based methods, the proposed dummy method, and selected learning-based methods on nine NUS benchmark image databases (lower is better).

Method	Low-level statistics-based methods							Learning-based methods						
	CR	CD	GW	WP	GGW	GE1	GE2	CM	PG	EG	IG	ML	GP	NIS
Dataset	Mean angular error (°)													
Canon1	3.09	<b>2.93</b>	5.16	7.99	3.16	3.45	3.47	5.43	6.13	6.07	6.37	3.58	3.21	4.18
Canon2	2.81	2.81	3.89	10.96	3.24	3.22	3.21	5.46	14.51	15.36	14.46	2.80	<b>2.67</b>	3.43
Fuji	<b>2.94</b>	3.15	4.16	10.20	3.42	3.13	3.12	5.79	8.59	7.76	6.80	3.12	2.99	4.05
Nikon1	3.06	<b>2.90</b>	4.38	11.64	3.26	3.37	3.47	6.26	10.14	13.00	9.67	3.22	3.15	4.10
Oly	<b>2.65</b>	2.76	3.44	9.78	3.08	3.02	2.84	5.29	6.52	13.20	6.21	2.92	2.86	3.22
Pan	2.89	2.96	3.82	13.41	3.12	2.99	2.99	5.70	6.00	5.78	5.28	2.93	<b>2.85</b>	3.70
Sam	2.94	<b>2.91</b>	3.90	11.97	3.22	3.09	3.18	5.72	7.74	8.06	6.80	3.11	2.94	3.66
Sony	<b>2.88</b>	2.93	4.59	9.91	3.20	3.35	3.36	5.07	5.27	4.40	5.32	3.24	3.06	3.45
Nikon2	<b>3.57</b>	3.81	4.60	12.75	4.04	3.94	3.95	7.66	11.27	12.17	11.27	3.80	3.59	4.36
Dataset	Median angular error (°)													
Canon1	2.08	2.01	4.15	6.19	2.35	2.48	2.44	<b>1.88</b>	4.30	4.68	4.72	2.80	2.67	3.04
Canon2	<b>1.86</b>	1.89	2.88	12.44	2.28	2.07	2.29	1.87	14.83	15.92	14.72	2.32	2.03	2.46
Fuji	<b>1.84</b>	2.15	3.30	10.59	2.60	1.99	2.00	2.15	8.87	8.02	5.90	2.70	2.45	2.95
Nikon1	1.91	2.08	3.39	11.67	2.31	2.22	2.19	<b>1.89</b>	10.32	12.24	9.24	2.43	2.26	2.40
Oly	1.79	1.87	2.58	9.50	2.15	2.11	2.18	<b>1.71</b>	4.39	8.55	4.11	2.24	2.21	2.17
Pan	1.70	2.02	3.06	18.00	2.23	2.16	2.04	<b>1.59</b>	4.74	4.85	4.23	2.28	2.22	2.28
Sam	<b>1.88</b>	2.03	3.00	12.99	2.57	2.23	2.32	1.99	7.91	6.12	6.37	2.51	2.29	2.77
Sony	2.10	2.33	3.46	7.44	2.56	2.58	2.70	<b>1.81</b>	4.26	3.30	3.81	2.70	2.58	2.88
Nikon2	2.42	2.72	3.44	15.32	2.92	2.99	2.95	<b>2.38</b>	10.99	11.64	11.32	2.99	2.89	3.51
Dataset	Trimean angular error (°)													
Canon1	2.56	<b>2.22</b>	4.46	6.98	2.50	2.74	2.70	2.47	4.81	4.87	5.13	2.97	2.79	3.30
Canon2	2.17	<b>2.12</b>	3.07	11.40	2.41	2.36	2.37	2.71	14.78	15.73	14.80	2.37	2.18	2.72
Fuji	<b>2.13</b>	2.41	3.40	10.25	2.72	2.26	2.27	2.97	8.64	7.70	6.19	2.69	2.55	3.06
Nikon1	2.23	<b>2.19</b>	3.59	11.53	2.49	2.52	2.58	2.87	10.25	11.75	9.35	2.59	2.49	2.77
Oly	<b>2.01</b>	2.05	2.73	9.54	2.35	2.26	2.20	2.60	4.79	10.88	4.63	2.34	2.28	2.42
Pan	<b>2.12</b>	2.31	3.15	14.98	2.45	2.25	2.26	2.64	4.98	5.09	4.49	2.44	2.37	2.67
Sam	<b>2.18</b>	2.22	3.15	12.45	2.66	2.32	2.41	2.79	7.70	6.56	6.40	2.63	2.44	2.94
Sony	<b>2.26</b>	2.42	3.81	8.78	2.68	2.76	2.80	2.40	4.45	3.45	4.13	2.82	2.74	2.95
Nikon2	<b>2.67</b>	3.10	3.69	13.80	3.22	3.21	3.38	4.96	11.11	12.01	11.30	3.11	2.96	3.84

ing statistical descriptor values is to look at the actual angular errors. Fig. 3 shows the sorted angular errors on the Sony (Cheng et al., 2014b) dataset for the well-known Gray-World method, the accurate Color Rabbit method, and the dummy Color Mule method. It can be seen that for about slightly more than half of the images CM results in a relatively low angular error, which in turn results in a low median. However, the tail of CM’s angular error distribution contains significantly higher values than the tails of other methods’ angular error distributions. Since the median does not consider this, it is automatically rendered not to be informative enough to provide a good description of CM’s performance.

## 4.2 Perceptual Significance of the Angular Error

It might seem that for CM a better descriptor would be the mean angular error. But before drawing conclusions like this one, first the perceptual significance

of the angular error should be considered. Under Weber’s law (Weber, 1846) the just noticeable difference increases linearly with the absolute error as was confirmed in (Gijssen et al., 2009). In the same paper a simple example is given to clarify this: while the difference between the results of algorithms with errors of  $3^\circ$  and  $4^\circ$  is noticeable to most people, this is hardly the case if these errors are  $15^\circ$  and  $16^\circ$ . This is explained even further by obtained experimental results. If  $\epsilon_{min}$  and  $\epsilon_{max}$  are two illumination estimation angular errors with  $\epsilon_{max}$  being the greater one, then the difference  $\Delta\epsilon = \epsilon_{max} - \epsilon_{min}$  between them is noticeable if it is at least  $0.06 \cdot \epsilon_{max}$ . This means that for an noticeable improvement an error  $\epsilon$  has to be lowered to

$$\epsilon' = (1 - 0.06) \cdot \epsilon = 0.94 \cdot \epsilon. \quad (3)$$

For a noticeable decline the error  $\epsilon$  has to be raised to

$$\epsilon^* = \frac{1}{1 - 0.06} \cdot \epsilon = \frac{1}{0.94} \cdot \epsilon. \quad (4)$$

This shows the weakness of the mean angular error, which does not take into account the percep-

tual difference as can be demonstrated by choosing a method and creating its degraded version. The degradation process is done by increasing the all of the initial method's angular errors by 5%, which is less than needed for a noticeable difference. By degrading the Color Rabbit method on the Sony dataset, its mean angular error raises from  $2.88^\circ$  to  $3.02^\circ$  even though there is no noticeable difference between the results of the initial and degraded method on individual images. If the degradation is performed in another way by choosing five errors that are less than  $1^\circ$  and increasing them by  $5^\circ$ , the Color Rabbit's mean raises to  $3.01^\circ$ , which is less than  $3.02^\circ$  in the first case, but it nevertheless results in five noticeable and serious illumination estimation accuracy deteriorations in contrast to the first degradation way.

Since both the mean and the median angular errors have shortages with respect to describing a method's performance, a better measure containing the best of these two statistical descriptors and taking into account the perceptual difference should be devised.

## 5 PROPOSED MEASURE

### 5.1 Definition

To resolve the paradox caused by describing the Color Mule's performance using the mean and median angular errors, we propose a new error measure based on the angular errors and two facts about their perception. The first one is that an angular error below  $1^\circ$  is not noticeable (Finlayson et al., 2005) (Fredembach and Finlayson, 2008). The errors  $\epsilon \in [0^\circ, 1^\circ]$  should therefore not be penalized. The second fact is the already mentioned linear increase of the just noticeable difference with the absolute error as stated by Weber's law and described by Eq. (3) and Eq. (4). Based on these equations an error  $\epsilon > 1$  can be described by using the number of just noticeable differences  $n$  that have led to its distancing from the  $1^\circ$ :

$$\epsilon = \left( \frac{1}{0.94} \right)^n. \quad (5)$$

Since  $n$  takes into account the actual linear perceptual difference caused by the angular error, we propose it to be the basis for describing the perceptual error of the illumination estimation. It is calculated as follows:

$$n = \log_{\frac{1}{0.94}} \epsilon = \frac{\ln \epsilon}{\ln \frac{1}{0.94}}. \quad (6)$$

Since  $\frac{1}{\ln \frac{1}{0.94}}$  is a constant, it has no impact on errors comparison. Therefore a slightly modified difference

description  $m$  can be used:

$$m = n \ln \frac{1}{0.94} = \ln \epsilon. \quad (7)$$

The expression in Eq. (7) can be additionally interpreted by looking at its derivative:

$$dm = \frac{d\epsilon}{\epsilon}. \quad (8)$$

As expected from the previous discussion, the increase of the perceptual difference is directly proportional to the increase of the angular error and inversely proportional to the angular error that is increased. Like in Weber's law, this means that in order to achieve the same perceptual difference, for higher angular errors the angular increase has to be larger than for the lower angular errors.

For the general case where  $\epsilon > 0$  the measure  $m$  from Eq. (7) is given as follows:

$$m = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } 0 \leq \epsilon \leq 1 \\ \ln \epsilon & \text{if } \epsilon > 1 \end{cases}. \quad (9)$$

The simplest way to use this measure to describe a methods performance on an image dataset is to calculate its mean value for all angular errors. The advantage of this mean over the mean angular error is that it considers the perceptual differences between different angular errors and its advantage over the median angular error is that it considers all angular errors.

### 5.2 Experimental Results

Table 2 shows the value of the proposed measure for the dummy Color Mule and some of the selected methods. The ranking between other methods excluding Color Mule remained the same as the ranking based on the median angular error. Color Mule is now ranked lower than the Color Rabbit and Color Distribution methods, but higher than the Gray-world and White-patch methods. The exception is only the Olympus dataset where the Gray-world method outperforms Color Mule. It can be seen that the proposed measure penalizes the angular error distribution tail of the proposed method, but not as strict as the mean angular error. On the other hand it does not simply disregard it as the median angular error thus avoiding confusion. The sorted proposed measure values on the Sony dataset for several chosen methods can be seen in Fig. 4.

### 5.3 Dataset Illumination Distribution

The proposed measure mostly resolves the paradox that resulted from the proposed method. However,

Table 2: Proposed measure for several selected methods on nine NUS benchmark image databases (lower is better).

Method	Selected methods				
	CR	CD	GW	WP	CM
Dataset	Proposed measure				
Canon1	0.8875	<b>0.8233</b>	1.2945	1.7062	1.0165
Canon2	<b>0.7823</b>	0.8003	1.0950	2.0899	1.0361
Fuji	<b>0.8058</b>	0.8419	1.1384	2.0114	1.0748
Nikon1	<b>0.8418</b>	0.8785	1.1658	2.0879	1.1010
Oly	<b>0.7442</b>	0.7667	0.9843	1.9116	0.9980
Pan	<b>0.7878</b>	0.8409	1.0887	2.3174	0.9959
Sam	<b>0.8223</b>	0.8256	1.1042	2.2348	1.0723
Sony	<b>0.8345</b>	0.8485	1.3177	1.8817	0.9565
Nikon2	<b>1.0194</b>	1.0708	1.2258	2.3318	1.2780

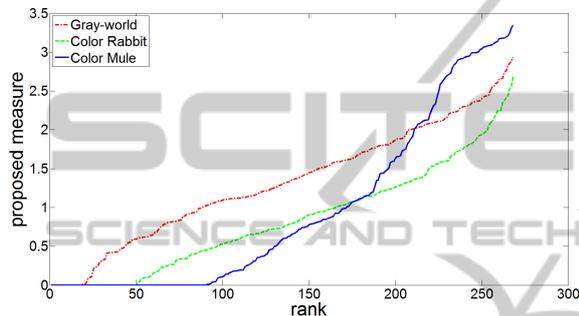


Figure 4: Comparison of sorted proposed measure values on the Sony dataset (Cheng et al., 2014b) for the Gray-world, Color Rabbit, and the proposed method.

there is still the question how such a simple method could have outperformed much more sophisticated methods in terms of median angular error and even some of the methods in terms of the proposed measure. The reason for this may be found in the dataset ground-truth illumination as can be demonstrated with the Sony dataset. In Fig. 2 it can be seen that for the Sony dataset most of the of ground-truth illumination chromaticities lay in the left part of the chromaticity space region. This can be demonstrated even further quantitatively by looking at the histogram of the red chromaticity component values of the ground-truth illumination in Fig. 5. Now the density of certain regions becomes even more clear: e.g. over 86% of the values are less than 0.27. Such density in a relatively small region can hardly be found in other benchmark datasets.

The proposed method simply (ab)uses this design fault that happened in image selection during the dataset creation and by choosing a good illumination value, it successfully covers most of the ground-truth illuminations in the testing process. This is also the reason why the median angular error could have been so low when compared to the one of other methods. At the same time the number of images whose ground-truth illuminations were distanced fur-

ther from the majority of other ground-truth illuminations was small, but the errors was big enough to cause a very high mean angular error regardless of the low median.

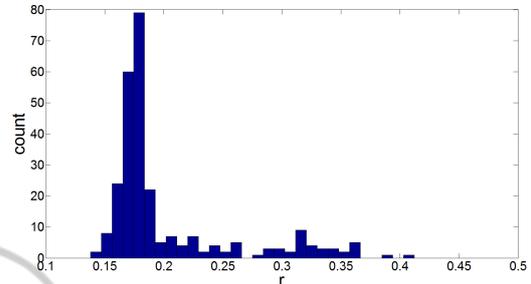


Figure 5: Histogram of the red chromaticity component values for the Sony (Cheng et al., 2014b) dataset ground-truth illumination chromaticities.

When using non-linear images of the GreyBall dataset (Ciurea and Funt, 2003), which has evenly spread ground-truth illuminations as shown in Fig. 6, the dummy Color Mule method performs very poor in terms of all performance measures including the proposed one as shown in Table 3. For the GreyBall dataset the proposed measure is consistent with the existing ones.

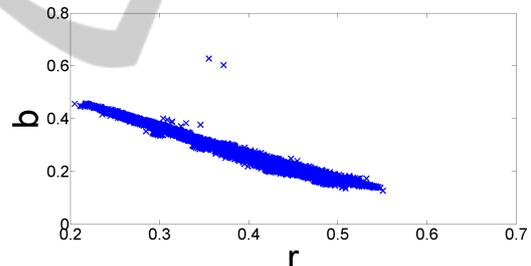


Figure 6: The  $rb$ -chromaticities of the GreyBall dataset (Ciurea and Funt, 2003) ground-truth illuminations.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A new illumination estimation accuracy measure has been proposed. In contrast to the most widely used angular error statistical descriptors, the proposed measure takes into account the perceptual difference between various errors. The good properties of mean and median are used by using all angular errors and penalizing them based on perceptual difference. Additionally, a method has been proposed that shows the importance of the representativity of the real-world scene illuminations in the benchmark datasets.

Table 3: Different performance measures for different color constancy methods on the original GreyBall dataset (Ciurea and Funt, 2003) (lower is better).

method	mean (°)	median (°)	proposed
do nothing	8.28	6.70	1.6209
<b>Low-level statistics-based methods</b>			
GW	7.87	6.97	1.8017
WP	6.80	5.30	1.5385
SoG	6.14	5.33	1.5732
general GW	6.14	5.33	1.5732
GE1	5.88	4.65	1.5013
GE2	6.10	4.85	1.5343
<b>Learning based methods</b>			
PG	7.07	5.81	1.6478
EG	6.81	5.81	1.6616
IG	6.93	5.80	1.6510
NIS	5.19	3.93	1.3369
EB	<b>4.38</b>	<b>3.43</b>	<b>1.1924</b>
CM	9.78	8.65	1.9069

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