

# **McIntosh's Unrealistic Picture of Peacocke and Hopkins on Realistic Pictures**

Catharine Abell

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I defend Christopher Peacocke's and Robert Hopkins's experienced resemblance accounts of depiction against criticisms put forward by Gavin McIntosh in a recent article in this journal. I argue that, while there may be reasons for rejecting Peacocke's and Hopkins's accounts, McIntosh fails to provide any.

In a recent paper, Gavin McIntosh argues that the accounts of depiction proposed by both Christopher Peacocke and Robert Hopkins fail because they cannot provide adequate explanations of pictorial realism.<sup>1</sup> This is simply false. McIntosh's argument relies on two erroneous assumptions, each of which independently undermines his conclusion. Firstly, he assumes that an account of depiction must provide an account of pictorial realism. This is incorrect. Secondly, he assumes that resemblance-based accounts of depiction can best explain pictorial realism by appeal to the notion of resemblance. This is not so. McIntosh is also guilty of seriously misinterpreting Hopkins's account of depiction. On Hopkins's account, pictures do not either "contain" or "stand for" solid angles of any sort. Finally,

none of McIntosh's three criticisms of Peacocke's account of depiction is persuasive. I will present each of these criticisms in turn.

The premises of McIntosh's argument are as follows:

1. An adequate account of depiction must explain what it is for one picture to be more realistic than another.
2. Accounts according to which depiction involves some resemblance relation between a picture and its object can best explain realism in terms of the strength of the relevant resemblance.
3. Both Peacocke and Hopkins construe depiction as involving some resemblance relation between picture and object.
4. Neither Peacocke nor Hopkins can explain realism in terms of the strength of the resemblance relation between picture and object.

McIntosh infers from Premises Two, Three and Four that neither Peacocke nor Hopkins can explain pictorial realism. From Premise One, he thus concludes that both accounts of depiction are mistaken. However, the first two premises of his argument are false. Firstly, an adequate account of depiction need not explain what it is for one picture to be more realistic than another. Not all pictures are realistic, and accounts of depiction need only concern themselves with that which is common to all pictures. *Pace* McIntosh, neither Peacocke nor Hopkins seeks to provide an account of realism, and neither need do so. Accounts of depiction need only be consistent with an adequate account of pictorial realism. They need not provide that account. One might object to this on the basis that every picture exhibits *some* degree of realism.

However, this is implausible. It does not follow from the fact that realism admits of degrees that all pictures possess it, any more than it follows from beauty's being a matter of degree that all pictures possess *it*. Some pictures are notable for their irrealism, just as others are notable for their ugliness. Moreover, realism, like beauty, is possessed by things other than pictures. Many sculptures, for example, are realistic in the way that pictures can be. To demand an account of pictorial realism of an account of depiction is as unreasonable as demanding it to explain what makes a picture beautiful.

Contrary to McIntosh's second premise, resemblance-based accounts of depiction are not especially well-suited to providing accounts of pictorial realism in terms of resemblance. Although realism is a matter of degree, depiction is not. One of the problems with the 'naïve' resemblance account of depiction is that it seems to construe depiction itself as a matter of degree. Peacocke's and Hopkins's more sophisticated experienced-resemblance accounts, on the other hand, have the distinct advantage of avoiding this trap. By construing picture and object as related by one's *experience* of the picture as resembling its object, Peacocke and Hopkins are able to construe depiction as an all-or-nothing affair. All things resemble all other things in some respect, but one need not experience them as doing so. I simply do not experience some things as resembling certain other things. Nonetheless, it is still true that I may experience things as resembling one another to varying degrees. However, for Peacocke and Hopkins, it is the fact that resemblance is experienced, rather than the degree of resemblance experienced, which is essential to depiction. For this reason, they should not attempt to explain

realism in terms of degrees of resemblance. If they did so, they would be hard-pressed to explain what it is for a picture to be unrealistic without committing themselves to the view that unrealistic pictures do not depict their objects. If either wished to provide an account of realism, he would be much better off appealing to some independent notion, such as the number and nature of the properties a picture depicts its object as possessing.<sup>2</sup> It is perfectly permissible for both to do this, since it would not contradict either account of depiction.

McIntosh sets out to assess both Peacocke's and Hopkins's ability to explain depiction by determining whether the resemblance relations they identify could be experienced as obtaining between pictures and their objects and thus whether they can give adequate explanations of pictorial realism in terms of those relations. I am bemused as to why pictorial realism is relevant here at all. If we could not experience pictures as resembling their objects in the respects that Peacocke and Hopkins claim we do, they will have failed to provide adequate accounts of depiction irrespective of whether their accounts explain pictorial realism. Why doesn't McIntosh criticise their accounts of depiction directly? In the absence to a satisfactory answer to this question, it suffices to note that his criticisms of Peacocke and Hopkins could succeed, even though his assumptions about realism are misguided.

According to Hopkins, we experience pictures as resembling their objects in outline shape. Although McIntosh quotes Hopkins's claim that "[t]wo items will resemble each other in outline shape to the extent that, at some point, one

subtends a solid angle similar to that subtended, at some point, by the other”, he misunderstands what this means. Hopkins makes it quite clear that the points at which the relevant solid angles are subtended must be external to the objects that subtend them. On Hopkins’s view, a picture resembles its object in outline shape if the solid angle the picture subtends at some point external to its surface resembles that which its object subtends at some point external to *its* surface. He writes:

Outline shape is relative to a point. It makes no sense to speak of an object’s outline shape tout court, only of its outline shape at a certain point... It is thus natural to wonder what point is involved in the outline shapes we perceive things as having... The obvious answer is that the point is the eye.<sup>3</sup>

This feature of Hopkins’s account has eluded McIntosh. He accuses Hopkins of claiming that solid angles are either in pictures, or that they represent the solid angles of the objects they depict.<sup>4</sup> While McIntosh is right that this claim is implausible, he is quite wrong to think that Hopkins can justly be accused of making it.

McIntosh also fails to provide adequate reason for rejecting Peacocke’s account of depiction. He makes three criticisms that are intended to show that Peacocke’s account is inadequate.<sup>5</sup> Firstly, he claims that Peacocke uses pictures in perspective as the model for his notion of a visual field.<sup>6</sup> He consequently argues that Peacocke is guilty of employing something

unacceptably like the notion of a picture in his analysis of depiction. However, it is not at all obvious that this is the case. McIntosh assumes both that the visual field is two-dimensional,<sup>7</sup> and that there are no features of our experience that support the notion of a visual field. Neither of these assumptions is warranted. While the notion of visual-field shape is indeed *related* to that of two-dimensional shape, it is not, *pace* McIntosh, equivalent to the latter notion. Visual-field shape is the sensational property that an object that would be obscured by a region on the fronto-parallel plane of a certain two-dimensional shape would normally produce.<sup>8</sup> Peacocke states that it is not two-dimensional shape, because it is a property of experiences and experiences do not have spatial properties.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there is independent evidence that can be invoked in support of the claim that we experience a visual field. For example, we experience the parallel edges of long, straight roads as converging in the distance, just as perspectival pictures depict them as doing. Perhaps the notion of a visual field does not best explain this phenomenon. Whatever the success of this notion, however, McIntosh fails to show that Peacocke's account is circular.

Secondly, McIntosh objects that if, as Peacocke argues, depiction really did involve visual field similarities, one would expect any similarity in the visual field impressions made by two pictures to correspond to an equivalent similarity in the visual field impressions made by their two objects.<sup>10</sup> However, he claims that this does not occur because, while pictures of heads look a lot like pictures of eggs, heads and eggs look very different. He cites Gombrich's observation that we are happy to accept egg-like shapes as

pictures of heads, even though we would be shocked by a real-life egg head. This is a very weak objection to Peacocke's view, and I suspect that McIntosh finds it convincing only because he is confused about the relation between depiction and realism. As I argued earlier, the fact that Peacocke appeals to *experienced* resemblance, rather than to actual resemblance, enables him to explain the all-or-nothingness of depiction, even though resemblance is a matter of degree. Peacocke need not say anything at all about the *degree* to which our visual field impression of a picture must resemble our visual field impression of its object. That it does so at all is sufficient. Consequently, it matters not a jot to Peacocke how much our visual field impression of one thing resembles that of another.

According to McIntosh's final objection, Peacocke cannot explain why drawing from photographs is easier than drawing from life. McIntosh reasons that, if Peacocke is correct in claiming that we experience a two-dimensional visual field, drawing from life should be just as easy as drawing from a photograph. He concludes from the fact that this is false that we do not experience a two-dimensional visual field. Let us ignore the fact that this objection assumes that the notion of a visual field is equivalent to that of a perspectival picture. I have already responded to that claim. To see what is wrong with this further objection, consider how much harder it would be to draw a picture of a still life arrangement by looking through a video camera strapped to one's eyes than to draw a picture of that arrangement from a photograph.<sup>11</sup> To draw the still life, one must be able to focus selectively on the different parts of the arrangement as one draws them, and then return to the point of view from

which the arrangement as a whole is to be drawn. The essential point is that the image on the video camera changes as one changes one's focus and moves in relation to the arrangement, whereas the photographic image does not alter. In the photograph, each of the objects in the arrangement is represented by a single part of the picture surface. In the camera, the part of the screen that represents any single object in the arrangement changes as the camera moves in relation to the arrangement. The relations that the parts of the screen representing the individual objects bear to one another also change. Although one does move in relation to a photograph when drawing a picture from it, the parts of the photograph that depict the individual objects maintain the same relations to one another. One need therefore only resume one's original relation to the photograph itself in order to resume the point of view from which one began drawing the arrangement it depicts. If one is using the video camera, however, one must change one's relation to each of the various objects in the arrangement such that each is represented in the same part of the screen as it was when one began one's drawing. It is easier to reassume the same relation to a single object than to multiple objects. Drawing from a photograph is easier than drawing from life, no matter how picture-like perception is.

While an adequate account of depiction should certainly be consistent with an adequate account of pictorial realism, there is no need for an account of depiction to explain pictorial realism. Moreover, there is no need for an experienced resemblance account of depiction to explain realism by appeal to degrees of resemblance experienced. Better explanations are available to



such accounts. I think that neither Peacocke's nor Hopkins's account of depiction is ultimately defensible.<sup>12</sup> However, McIntosh rejects their accounts for the wrong reasons.

<sup>1</sup> Gavin McIntosh, 'Depiction Unexplained: Peacocke and Hopkins on Pictorial Representation', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 43 (July 2003), no. 3, pp279-283.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Peacocke's brief comments on pictorial realism suggest that he is sympathetic to such an explanation of realism. See Christopher Peacocke, 'Depiction', *Philosophical Review*, vol.96 (July 1987), no. 3, p. 392.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998), p62.

<sup>4</sup> McIntosh, 'Depiction Unexplained', pp286-287.

<sup>5</sup> Peacocke proposed this account in Peacocke, 'Depiction'.

<sup>6</sup> McIntosh, 'Depiction Unexplained', p283.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p285.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Peacocke, *Sense and Content* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983), p20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp20-21.

<sup>10</sup> McIntosh, 'Depiction Unexplained', p283.

<sup>11</sup> I ignore the extra difficulties associated with having a cumbersome object strapped to one's head.

<sup>12</sup> For criticisms of Hopkins's account of depiction, see my forthcoming 'On Outlining the Shape of Depiction', *Ratio*, vol. VIII (March 2005), no. 1.

Catharine Abell,  
Department of Philosophy,  
Macquarie University,  
Sydney, NSW, 2109  
Australia  
[cabell@scmp.mq.edu.au](mailto:cabell@scmp.mq.edu.au)