

Description Across the Disciplines
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Conference Titles and Abstracts

Depiction as Description

Alison Bechdel

Is a description made with an image more “literal” than one made with words? And just how many words is a picture going for these days? Using examples from my own autobiographical comics, I’ll talk about the balance between showing and telling, words and pictures, realism and abstraction, memory and documentary evidence.

Clouds and the Problem of Endless Description

Lorraine Daston

Clouds have no doubt been objects of observation ever since there have been people and skies. Yet it is striking how very late clouds become objects of systematic observation and standardized description. The remarkable astrometeorological diaries of ancient Mesopotamia, which kept continuous records of almost all phenomena observable in the heavens for over six centuries did not mention clouds; the weather-watching networks of the earliest scientific academies in the 17th and 18th centuries were given instructions no more specific than to record the “face of the sky”; Victorian art critic John Ruskin heaped scorn on the otherwise painstakingly naturalistic Dutch landscapes for their haphazard daubing of white paint blobs on blue backgrounds. Ruskin’s own elaborate descriptions of what he believed were new varieties of nineteenth-century storm clouds provides a clue to why clouds so long eluded observation and classification: the descriptions are long, thickly detailed, carefully comparative – and almost impossible to recognize. Clouds defied classification and scientific description until the nineteenth century because they seemed the very model and metaphor of all that was variable, mutable, and therefore infinitely describable – which amounted to being indescribable. The efforts to create the first cloud atlas in the late nineteenth century illuminate the problem of holding protean phenomena fast in the grip of words and images.

Guercino's *Anni Mirabile*: 1619-20

Michael Fried

The years 1619-20 saw an astonishing outpouring of stupendous paintings by Guercino, one of the major painters of the century. Amazingly, they have never been made the focus of sustained analysis. Michael Fried's lecture attempts to show how much has been missed.

Observable Behavior 1-10

Liza Johnson

I am a filmmaker who has made films with both professional and nonprofessional actors, in modes that have been called “observational” and modes that have been called “classical.” Occasionally these terms have been used to refer to the same film.

I would like to think through some of the formal elements of “observational” style, especially those that the film scholar Ivone Margulies associates with questions of narrative realism, such as the long take and excessive duration. I would like to build upon Margulies' insistence that realism and description are all always rhetorical modes despite their apparent relationship to the indexicality of the photographic image.

In the spirit of interdisciplinary conversation, I want to ask, how is the question of observable behavior fundamental to dramatic performance? How can we think about questions of surface and depth, and the ways in which film acting has long relied upon observable behavior to negotiate these questions? What generates performed behavior? If we insist on answering this question in a relational or intersubjective way, how might we understand the impossibility of the empirical observation of performed behavior? How can we think about both classical and excessive uses of behavioral description in narrative film? How might each mode relate to the labor of film workers? Or to the different demands of fine arts commerce vs. film commerce?

Audio Description Described

Georgina Kleege

Audio description is the practice of providing verbal description of visual art, theatrical performance, film and video for blind audiences. Although this service has been available for at least two decades, it has only recently begun to be scrutinized by disability studies scholars, disability rights advocates and the blind consumers themselves. In this paper I will analyze the current standards for audio description to show how they often reinscribe reductive stereotypes about blindness. I will also describe an experimental online platform that seeks to crowd source audio description of YouTube videos, in an effort to spark innovation and creativity.

Giving (Away) Description in the Psychological Sciences

Jill Morawski

This paper assesses the practices of what can be called thin and thick description in psychology, suggesting that psychological scientists produce (and market) thin descriptions yet their own work in producing these descriptions is thick, deep, and complex. This was the case with now classic behaviorism as it is with the current cognitive psychology. Morawski will illustrate this point with archival data and public descriptions of Stanley Milgram's behavioral studies of obedience. Yet the ultimate aim is to raise questions of an ontological nature, or a political ontological nature, asking about performance and agency in the psychological sciences.

The Cocktail Party

Ann Reynolds

How to describe the group dynamics among individuals whose relationships were crucial to a historical moment but never appeared together in a formal group portrait or any other type of collective institutional representation: a group exhibition, edited anthology, or single issue of a magazine? In 1940s New York, the cocktail party, a heterogeneous yet ubiquitous semi-private, semi-public social ritual, provided artists and writers with a rhetoric for describing how relationships among individuals, might have looked, felt, and signified, particularly through the "in between spaces" these social interactions produced. Using two visual and textual descriptions of cocktail parties from the decade—Maya Deren's film *Ritual in Transfigured Time* and Isabel Bolton's short novel *Do I Wake or Sleep*—and a more contemporary story by Roberto Bolaño, I will consider how such descriptions can supplement the archive with images of "forgotten" relationships between individuals, particularly those who are now presumed to have had little to no contact with one another at all. A deeper sense of how these relationships were experienced will also allow me, and hopefully others, to imagine history differently.

Interpret or Describe?

Cannon Schmitt

In a 1936 essay titled "Narrate or Describe?", the Hungarian Marxist literary critic Georg Lukács codified what was already, for the likes of Percy Lubbock and Henry James, the aesthetic superiority of novelistic narration—colloquially, "showing"—over description—or "telling." Description, Lukács argues, attests to a fundamentally passive, disengaged stance toward life; narration, by contrast, derives from active engagement on the part of authors and, as a consequence, produces readerly engagement. Current debates in literary studies around questions of surface reading, literal reading, and other putatively descriptive approaches reprise Lukács's binaries in connection with criticism. To interpret a text, it is claimed, is to alter it or to fail to respect it (right: the proper critical activity, say interpreters); to describe a text is to see what it is in itself, to allow it autonomy (yes: just as it should be, say describers). Beginning with a reconsideration of Lukács's essay, I will offer a series of propositions that seek to collapse the opposition between interpreting and describing, and in particular to assert the absolute dependence of interpretation on description. The problem of what sense to make of technical language in novels will serve as an exemplary instance of that dependence.

The Description of Power and the Power of Description; or How to Listen to Music After New Historicism

Mary Ann Smart

For the past ten or fifteen years musical description has played an ever smaller role in musicological writing. Put on notice by the trenchant methodological interventions of Carolyn Abbate and Gary Tomlinson in the late 1990s and early 00s, music scholars have shied away from dealing with pieces of music much at all, for fear of replicating their own aesthetic preoccupations while muting the listening experiences of audiences and performers of the past. This conscientious attention to what those historical "others" might have heard and cared about in a piece by Mozart or Verdi has led to a style of writing that is heavy with description--but of things like concert hall decor, experimental and short-lived musical instruments, the intricate social networks that link musicians and patrons, and obsolete scientific theories of sound production. These attentive micro-histories have enlivened the field and reshaped our understanding of familiar works, but at the expense of interaction with the aesthetic and with musical works themselves. In this paper I will first assess the situation, offering some statistics about the types of description and history-writing that dominate in prominent journals and prize-winning publications, and then propose some paths by which we might reintroduce close attention to musical detail to musicological writing without falling into the *Denkfehler* that scared us away from it in the first place.

Description and Extinction

Joanna Stalnaker

In this paper I will look at a key moment in the history of description — the end of the eighteenth century — when the question of whether description should be understood as a scientific or literary practice was posed. My point of departure will be the naturalist George Cuvier's reception speech to the Académie Française, in which he outlines a brief history of literature centering on the practice of description. For Cuvier, the second half of the eighteenth century saw an unprecedented convergence of scientific and literary description. But in his view, this convergence represented a dead end for modern literature. If literature was to survive in a world haunted by the specter of species extinction, it must never lose sight of its focus on the human. In conclusion, I will reflect on the implications of Cuvier's association between description and extinction for the survival of literature and the humanities today.

The Point of Precision

Katie Stewart

What can happen to the concept when it is put to the service of approaching the singularity of what happens? Can it amplify an intuition or a sensation? Can it keep up with the most ordinary skills and habits of foregrounding/backgrounding elements of a scene through which something rises to a point of palpability like the raised knap of corduroy? Can it, like character acting, ride the cutting edges of a gesture or a disposition into the crystallization of a signature expression? Can it follow the not yet (or as if) of a body's this-ness? Can it stay with the compositionality of things to become worldly capable, sensitive to the manner of a world as an ethical, aesthetic, and political task?

Here I approach these questions through experiments in writing in which singular conditions of perception are intensified to become a gathering place of dispositions and a threshold to a real. These experiments hinge on the precision of forms: the lines of contact with materialities and compositional practices that constitute a life, the worlding of an event in a place seen through the lines of expressivity it literally energizes; the atmospheric attunements that constitute the labors of being in some world. I propose an art of description that hones in on these precisions of living.