

DIAGNOSING PROBLEMS WITH DESCRIPTION

The following passages are extracted from recently completed dissertations about audiovisual and ephemeral objects. Each passage refers to an object that has not been previously described in the text. Some details have been changed to keep the authors anonymous.

For each example, consider:

- Does the description provide a vivid and understandable “portrait” of the object? Do we “see” or “hear” what the author does?
- Does the author make sense of the description – do we understand why we are reading that particular description, and how the author arrived at her interpretation?
- What strategies could make the passage stronger?

For our own comments on the strengths and weaknesses of each passage, see page 2 of this handout.

- 1) *As grey forms busily dance over a grey background and leave grey streaks in their wake or when a cut-out head from a film poster rotates on a grey surface and grows larger until it is substituted for a grey circle that finally engulfs the screen (over the course of 14 frames), **Twilight Burst** plays with the perceptual processes that occur in constructions of cinematic motion and overwhelms the viewer with the artifice that lies at its foundation.*
- 2) *Giacomo Balla’s **Girl Running on a Balcony** (1912) would be unintelligible if viewed as a static scene, and yet the painting is not literally in motion. As with any painting, it is the viewer who mentally contributes the movement. Unlike a classic, motionless subject, therefore, a nude in motion only really functions when one is in the process of viewing it. It is the viewer who puts it in motion and makes it come to life, so to speak. Movement in painting assumes a participating audience; a fact that is telling of Balla’s attitude towards erotic encounters.*
- 3) *One late afternoon, upon leaving the theater, a lively engagement ritual was underway, complete with music and a young male dancer. I decided I would ask some of the attendees if I could take a seat and watch. As I approached, I was met with smiles and curious stares. I asked a group of ladies if it would be alright for me to watch this ritual, as I had never seen one in Ankhmor before. They laughed, and motioned for me to take a seat next to them. A young, lanky man, dressed in a jeans and a T-shirt was dancing to music blaring from an old stereo in front of the seated crowd. His style of dancing was similar to what one could see in music videos on television. I soon realized that his role was to animate the crowd, and encourage people to get up and dance. Women were reluctant at first, but when a Madonna song came on, people began to move.*

Comments on passage 1: The passage is inventive with its verbs (“busily dance”, “grows larger”, “engulfs”), but is repetitive and imprecise with its nouns. First, more description is needed to explain the different shades of grey that coalesce together in the film frame. Second, durations should be made clear, especially for readers who do not know that “14 frames” of film is roughly half a second of actual viewing time. The description could be thus broken down into two sentences with these points in mind.

More importantly, the author jumps from the sparse description to the interpretation without leading the reader through the intermediary stage (in this instance, explaining through which somatic or cognitive effects the description leads to the interpretation). The film “plays with a perceptual processes” and “overwhelms the viewer”— but *how* does it do that? In this case, the passage might make the connection by describing how the rapid transitions and flickers test the limits of perceptual memory, and how the monochromatic color scheme challenges the eye’s ability to distinguish the boundaries of shapes and objects.

Comments on passage 2: The author is trying to explain the experience of viewing Balla’s painting of a subject in motion by contrasting it with the experience of watching a “classic, motionless” subject. With the classical nude the viewer “mentally contributes the movement” (“as with any painting”), but in the Balla case the viewer “puts it in motion” and becomes a “participating audience”. The words that try to make a contrast between these two experiences are broad and vague, making both the painting and the experience of viewing it unclear. The paragraph could be improved by including more description of the movements of the spectator’s eye that work to set this painting in motion – and how those movements are made possible through specific items (lines, colors, repetition of forms, etc.) in the painting. Finally, the paragraph ends with a very broad throw-away note about how this viewing experience is telling of the painter’s attitudes toward eroticism. This seems like the topic sentences for the next paragraph, which presents additional evidence that supports the general claim about the artist’s attitude.

Comments on passage 3: This passage includes too many details without clearly guiding the reader toward the relevant details or making meaning of what is seen. Many authors of ethnographic studies choose to include block descriptions or summaries of an event before going on to analyze or discuss what was witnessed. This is a stylistic choice unique to each author. However, even the description alone should help clue the reader about relevant details that will be addressed or discussed later on. Half of this paragraph is spent on the author and how s/he came to witness the event, and only the other half is spent on the actual event. Is this a project about social rituals in Ankhmor? In this case, more details about the involved people and their interactions with each other are needed, with fewer details about the animator’s body or clothes. Is this a project about the influence of media images and foreign cultural objects on traditional ceremonies in this culture? In this case, more description is needed about how exactly the animator’s “dancing style” was similar to “music videos” running on television at the time, and what kind of music was played other than Madonna.

Current ethnographic studies increasingly choose to interweave description with discussion, in order to make meaning of an event as it is unfolding for the reader, as well as to make the project more accessible to readers from other disciplines. This structuring decision is up to the individual author.

