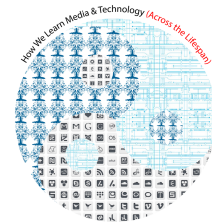




# How We Learn

## (Media & Technology Across the Lifespan)

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### HWL Tracer Bullet #61

## *Description & Depiction: Between Thick & Thin*

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### 1. Working Problems

- a. We commonly acknowledge four physical phenomena (ITSO) or perceptual and phenomenal modes (Visual, Narrativistic, Aural, and Haptic) and four associated productive movements or practices (Depiction, Description, Desonification, and Designification):
  - i. Image → Visual → Depict
  - ii. Text → Narrativistic → Describe
  - iii. Sound → Aural → Desonify (or Desonate)
  - iv. Object → Haptic → Designate (or Designify)
- b. In 1509, da Vinci realized that using words to describe the human body and all its parts in minute detail, inside and out, confuses the reader and confounds knowledge. He then reasons, “it is therefore necessary both to depict and to describe” (folio no. 798, W. An. IV 157a, p. 91).
- c. Phenomena-Data-Description/Depiction-Interpretation
  - i. Description and depiction require fidelity to the data (i.e., to human & nonhuman actors or participants) or a provision of what is happening to help readers see and hear or draw one closer to the actors, action, culture, phenomena, or data, etc.
- d. Couzin (1973, p. 284): ‘Resemblance’ has at least two poles of meaning: as a relation of similarity between things on the basis of their perceptible properties and as a relation between things on the basis of a relation of similarity between our *perceptions* of these things (on the basis of *their* properties).

### 2. Etymology

- a. *Descriptio*
  - i. Bourget (2014, p. 204): The Latin *descriptio* denotes either a drawing or a written or oral description. More rarely, a *descriptio* is a visual sketch, but also a verbal description or a representation in the imagination. There is an image in both cases, but the visualization is not necessarily literal: in both cases, the de- prefix indicates that one “de-scribes” or “de-picts” *from* a model or the original. Until the seventeenth century, the English word “description” could mean a pictorial representation— a portrait.
    1. The word is still used by Hogarth (“a description of such lines as compose the features of a face”), but more in the sense of a drawing or delineation, whereas “depiction” contains the root “pict”— that is, paint, color, pigment. Svetlana Alpers continues to use “description” with visual connotation, opposing the description characteristic of Dutch painting and a new visual culture with the narration characteristic of Italian painting and traditional text-based culture.
    2. Most often, however, “description” designates a verbal mode of visualization or metaphorical representation that compares poorly

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with the visual arts. Addison emphasizes its ambiguous or secondary status as “resembling even less” than painting (which itself resembles its objects less than sculpture), though “description” is still closer to what it represents than music.

- ii. Bourget (2014, p. 205): “*Ekphrasis*” (from *phrazō* [φράζω], “to declare,” and *ek* [ἐκ], “completely”) is a putting into words that exhausts its object; the term denotes minute and complete descriptions of works of art.

### 3. Definitions

#### a. Description (*denotation or representation by text...*)

- i. Valla (ca. 1450): an explanation of the qualities present to a thing and its actions.
- ii. *Encyclopedié* (1754): the enumeration of the attributes of a thing... descriptions that describe objects well, that by precise images render things present— not only that which is great, extraordinary, or beautiful, but even that which is disagreeable to see... [The principle] seems to be an action of the mind that compares the ideas that are born from the words with the ideas that come from the very presence of objects themselves. (Trans. V. Lenthe)
  - 1. a figure of thought by development of which, instead of simply indicating an object, [it] makes it somehow visible. (Trans. C. Wall, 2006, p. 113)
- iii. Shenefelt (1959, p. 331): [conveyance of] a concept of the object under scrutiny as clearly as possible by means of words, pictures, or diagrams.
- iv. Bal, *Narratology* (1985, p. 130): a textual fragment in which features are attributed to objects.
- v. Pomerantz (2015, p. 23): Unfortunately it’s difficult to define “description” without being circular; even some dictionaries define “description” as “describing something.” Fortunately, the commonsense definition is the right one here: a description tells you something about the thing being described. A description is a statement about a thing, providing some information about that thing. A description sets the described thing apart from all the other things that exist in the universe, to help you identify the described thing later.

#### b. Depiction (*denotation or representation by image...*)

- i. da Vinci (1509): it is therefore necessary both to depict and to describe (folio no. 798, W. An. IV 157a, p. 91).
- ii. Lopes (1996 pp. 58, 59): denotation in a pictorial symbol system... pictures denote in symbol systems: depiction is system-relative. Just as sentences have meaning only in the context of a language, so pictures refer only in the context of a system.
- iii. Hopkins (2003, p. 653): a form of representation which essentially works by capturing the appearance of things.
- iv. Blumson (2006, p. 336): a kind of representation, common to figurative painting and sculpture, photographs, maps, sketches and the like.
  - 1. I argue that Goodman's [and Lopes's] claim that depiction is a kind of symbol system is in fact compatible with the platitude that depictive representation is not arbitrary but mediated by resemblance. Second, I disagree with Goodman's [and Lopes's] definition of depiction as a kind of symbol system. Although I agree with Goodman [and Lopes] that some kinds of depiction, such as maps, do belong to depictive symbol systems, I argue that not all

depictions do. In addition to this, I present a positive analysis of depictive symbol systems in terms of resemblance.

- v. Briscoe (2016, p. 51): Pictures, according to resemblance theories of depiction, are akin to models: their job is to simulate the outward appearance of an actual or possible object of visual experience.

#### 4. Conceptual History

##### a. Description

- 1. Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1929, pp. 85-86): Discourse can but intimate connections which if followed out may lead one to have an existence. Things in their immediacy are unknown and unknowable, not because they are remote or behind some impenetrable veil of sensation of ideas, but because knowledge has no concern with them. For knowledge is a memorandum of conditions of their appearance, concerned, that is, with sequences, coexistences, relations. Immediate things may be *pointed to* by words, but not described or defined. Description when it occurs is but a part of a circuitous method of pointing or denoting; index to a starting point and road which if taken may lead to a direct and ineffable presence.

##### ii. History

- 1. White (1984, p. 2): Within professional historical studies, however, the narrative has been viewed for the most part neither as a product of a theory nor as the basis for a method, but rather as a *form of discourse* which may or may not be used for the representation of historical events, depending upon whether the primary aim is to *describe* a situation, *analyze* an historical process, or *tell* a story.

- iii. Derrida (1988, pp. 77-78): [Austin and Searle] speak of all the "negative" effects of [speech acts]: corruption, infelicities, parasites, etc.... What must be included in the description, i.e., in *what* is described, but also in the practical discourse, in the *writing that describes*, is not merely the factual reality of corruption and of alteration [*de l'ecart*], but *corruptability* (to which it would be better henceforth not to give this name, which implies generally a pathological dysfunction, a degeneration or an ethical-political defect) and *dissociability*, traits tied to *iterability*.

##### iv. Thick Description

- 1. Ryle "What is *le Penseur* doing?" (1968/1996, pp. 496-497):
  - a. Come back to our winker. Perhaps, being new to the art, he winks rather slowly, contortedly and conspicuously. A third boy, to give malicious amusement to his cronies, parodies this clumsy wink. How does he do this? Well, by contracting his right eyelids in the way in which the clumsy winker had winked. But the parodist is not himself clumsily trying covertly to signal a message to an accomplice. He is deftly trying conspicuously to exhibit something, and he fails if his cronies are not looking, or are not amused, or mistakenly suppose him to be trying covertly to signal to an accomplice.... The thinnest description of what the rehearsing parodist is doing is, roughly, the same as for the involuntary eyelid twitch; but its thick description is a many-layered sandwich, of which only the bottom slice is catered for by that thinnest description.

- b. (p. 501): It is often supposed by philosophers and psychologists that thinking is saying things to oneself, so that what *le Penseur* is doing on his rock is saying things to himself. But, apart from other big defects in this view, it fails because it stops just where it ought to begin. Very likely *le Penseur* was just now murmuring something under his breath or saying it in his head. But the question is, 'What is the thick description of what he was essaying or intending in murmuring those words to himself?' The thin description 'murmuring syllables under his breath', though true, is the thinnest possible description of what he was engaged in. The important question is 'But what is the correct and thickest possible description of what *le Penseur* was trying for in murmuring those syllables?'
  - c. (p. 504): Still *en route* for our wanted sketch of the thick description or descriptions of what *le Penseur* is after in saying or sub-saying things to himself, let us look at the corresponding thick descriptions of three other people who are, quite likely audibly, saying things to themselves.
2. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)
- a. (pp. 5-6): In anthropology, or anyway social anthropology, what the practitioners [sic] do is ethnography. And it is in understanding what ethnography is, or more exactly what doing ethnography is, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge. This, it must immediately be said, is not a matter of methods. From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, "thick description."
  - b. Consider, he says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, "phenomenalistic" observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows.
  - c. (pp. 9-10): I shall come back to this too-compacted aphorism later, as well as to the details of the text itself. The point for now is only that ethnography is thick description.
  - d. (p. 16): If ethnography is thick description and ethnographers those who are doing the describing, then the determining question for any given example of it, whether a field journal squib or a Malinowski-sized monograph, is

whether it sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones. It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar.

### 3. ANT

- a. Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (2005): The useful notion of ‘thick description’ provides a welcome attention to details but not necessarily to style. ‘Thickness’ should also designate: ‘Have I assembled enough?’ It should give the word ‘assembling’ a political meaning. (p. 136)
- b. Latour (pp. 136-137): The simple act of recording anything on paper is already an immense transformation that requires as much skill and just as much artifice as painting a landscape or setting up some elaborate biochemical reaction. No scholar should find humiliating the task of sticking to description. This is, on the contrary, the highest and rarest achievement.
- c. (p. 137): However, we worry that by sticking to description there may be something missing, since we have not ‘added to it’ something else that is often called an ‘explanation’. And yet the opposition between description and explanation is another of these false dichotomies that should be put to rest—especially when it is ‘social explanations’ that are to be wheeled out of their retirement home.
- d. (p. 137): Either the networks that make possible a state of affairs are fully deployed—and then adding an explanation will be superfluous—or we ‘add an explanation’ stating that some other actor or factor should be taken into account, so that it is the *description* that should be *extended* one step further. If a description remains in need of an explanation, it means that it is a bad description.
- e. (p. 144): S[tudent]: ‘Just describe’. Sorry to ask, but is this not terribly naive? Is this not exactly the sort of empiricism, or realism, that we have been warned against? I thought your argument was, um, more sophisticated than that.
- f. P[rofessor]: Because you think description is easy? You must be confusing it, I guess, with strings of clichés. For every hundred books of commentaries and arguments, there is only one of description. To describe, **to be attentive to the concrete state of affairs, to find the uniquely adequate account of a given situation**, I myself have always found this incredibly demanding.
- g. (p. 149): P: That’s what I am telling you: you are being badly trained! Not teaching social science doctoral students to write their PhDs is like not teaching chemists to do laboratory experiments. That’s why I am teaching nothing but writing nowadays. I keep repeating the same mantra: ‘describe, write, describe, write.’
- h. S: The problem is that’s not what my supervisor wants! He wants my case studies to ‘lead to some useful generalization’. He does not want ‘mere description’.

## ii. Thin Description

1. Ryle (1968, p. 501): It is often supposed by philosophers and psychologists that thinking is saying things to oneself, so that what *le Penseur* is doing on his rock is saying things to himself. But, apart from other big defects in this view, it fails because it stops just where it ought to begin. Very likely *le Penseur* was just now murmuring something under his breath or saying it in his head. But the question is, 'What is the thick description of what he was essaying or intending in murmuring those words to himself?' The thin description 'murmuring syllables under his breath', though true, is the thinnest possible description of what he was engaged in. The important question is 'But what is the correct and thickest possible description of what *le Penseur* was trying for in murmuring those syllables?'
2. Love (2003, p. 403): Geertz drew on a distinction between thin and thick description originally made by ordinary language philosopher Gilbert Ryle in the late 1960s. For Ryle, thin description was an unadorned, first-order account of behavior, one that could be recorded just as well by a camera as by a human agent. Thick description, by contrast, added many layers of human significance, including attributions of intention, emotion, cognition, and depth, as well as cultural context and display — all those affective and aesthetic qualities that literary critics look for in texts. In borrowing thick description from Ryle and tying it closely to the practice of ethnography, Geertz made semiotics central to the social sciences and suggested literary analysis as a model for reading culture. Critics who have taken up Geertz's concept of thick description over the past several decades have tended to overlook the importance — for both Geertz and Ryle — of thin description.
3. Jackson (2013, pp. 151, 153): Many anthropologists might balk at the seemingly preposterous idea of championing "thin description." Geertz's invocation of ethnographic thickness has just about universal appeal, especially as a way of justifying ethnography's seat at the social scientific table. Geertz states definitively that "ethnography is thick description." Period. And thinness represents an inadequate attempt, its dilution.... Many anthropologists might balk at the seemingly preposterous idea of championing "thin description." Geertz's invocation of ethnographic thickness has just about universal appeal, especially as a way of justifying ethnography's seat at the social scientific table. Geertz states definitively that "ethnography is thick description." Period. And thinness represents an inadequate attempt, its dilution.

## b. Depiction

- i. Gregory (1970, p. 32): Pictures have a double reality. Drawings, paintings, and photographs are objects in their own right- patterns on a flat sheet-and at the same time entirely different objects to the eye. We see both a pattern of marks on paper, with shading, brush-strokes... and at the same time we see that these compose a face, a house.... Pictures are unique among objects; for they are seen as both themselves and as some other thing, entirely different from the paper or canvas.... Pictures are paradoxes. No object can be in two places at the same time; no object can lie in both two-

and three-dimensional space. Yet pictures are both visibly flat and three-dimensional.

ii. **Thick Depiction**

1. Deep Depiction or Deep Resemblance

- a. Briscoe (2016, p.): Central to the deep resemblance theory is the idea that pictures function by presenting virtual models of objects and scenes in pictorial space. In order to motivate this proposal and to draw out its consequences, it is helpful to begin by reflecting on real-world models and their use. I stipulatively use the term “model” here in a broad way that includes 3D scale-models and sculptures, but also extends to decoys, dummies, dioramas, mock-ups, and movie set façade

iii. Typologies of Depiction

1. Pictorial Realism — Conventionalism

- a. Stannus (1891a, p. 865; 1891b, p. 874): the attempt to render the reproduction as like the reality as is possible, even to the verge of deception.... object is represented with the utmost fidelity to the actual appearances.
- b. Stannus (1891a, p. 865): These two methods, when applied absolutely, form the two extremes: The most complete REALISM being at one end, and the most limited CONVENTIONALISM at the other. There are scales of gradual reduction between them:
  - a. Reduction in the NUMBER OF PARTS which preserve their Realistic rendering;
  - b. Reduction in the DEGREE of REALISM through all parts.

REALISM ..... CONVENTIONALISM.

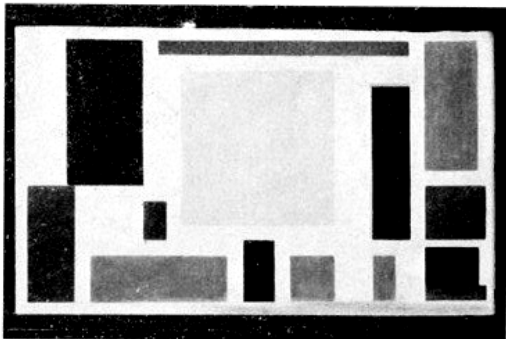
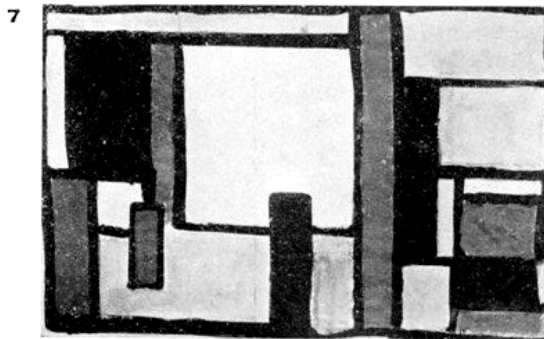
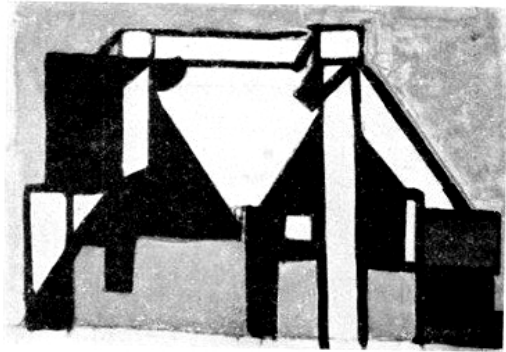
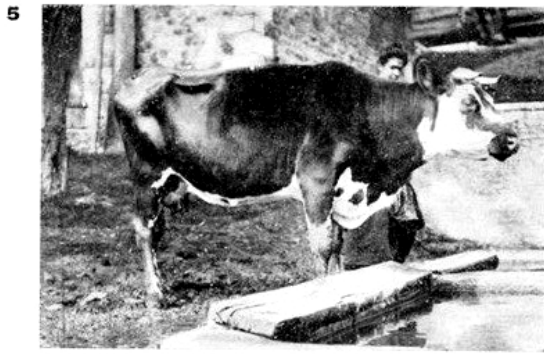
COMPLETE OR PICTORIAL REAL- ISM, in which all parts are realistically repre- sented (see § 10).	SEMI-PICTORIAL REALISM, in which the Back-ground is re- duced to a flat-tint, while all the remaining parts are realistically repre- sented (see § 11).	DECORATIVE REALISM, in which the chief Feature ( <i>only</i> ) is realistically repre- sented, and all the other parts are reduced to con- ventional renderings (see § 12).	COMPLETE CON- VENTIONALISM, in which all parts are re- duced to conventional renderings (see Conven- tionalism).
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2. Similarly is a very basic typology of depiction and objects: **Real, Representational, and Quantum** (Ocvirk et. al. 2006, p. 13):  
Development toward Abstraction

Object from Nature	Naturalism	Realism	Semiabstract	Abstraction	
	Fully representational. (very objective)	Representational but emphasizing the emotional. (more subjective)	Partly represen- tational but simplified and rearranged.	(objective) <i>Based on a subject but visually appears nonobjective.</i>	(nonobjective) Nonrepresentational, started without <i>any reference to subject</i> and assuming artistic value resides in <i>form and content</i> completely.

3. Doesburg’s (1925, p. 47) cow in *Grundbegriffe der neuen gestaltenden Kunst* demonstrates the point:





**ÄSTHETISCHE TRANSFIGURATION EINES GEGENSTANDES**  
 Abb. 5: Photographische Darstellung. Abb. 6: Formgebundene Akzentuierung von Verhältnissen.  
 Abb. 7: Aufhebung der Form. Abb. 8: Bild

4. Fritsch also demonstrates an extension of realism to abstraction. Abstracted Swiss army knife (Kelsey Fritsch, <https://kelsey4142.wordpress.com/drawing-i/>):



iv.

2.