Universität
Zürich UZH

<theorizing image descriptions:

literature and/as alt text>

workshop with

prof. dr. seo-young chu (cuny)

13.-14. june 2024

organization:

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Theorizing Image Descriptions: Literature and/as Alt Text

Workshop with Seo-Young Chu (City University of New York)
13–14 June 2024 (14:00–18:00 and 09:30–14:00)
University of Zürich, Plattenstrasse 43, 8032 Zürich, room PLG-2-211

> Fragmented marble sculpture of three nude women,
> with missing heads, and their arms around each other.
>
> Alt text of the *Marble Statue Group of the Three Graces*,
> Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Alt texts (alternative texts) are short text-based descriptions or translations of visual content. Designed "primarily for people who are visually impaired (inclusive of blind/low vision)" (Perkins School for the Blind), they serve three main purposes: Most prominently, they are intended to help users understand the content of the image, even if they cannot see it. Additionally, alt texts help search engines understand the content of an image and how it relates to the surrounding text, thereby improving the visibility of a website in search engine results ('search engine optimization'). Lastly, in situations where an image cannot be displayed (due to slow internet connection, broken image links, or if images are turned off in a web browser), the alt text will be shown in place of the image in an attempt at ensuring that the content and context of the image are not lost.

While alt texts, as Georgina Kleege notes, "must be neutral and objective" (2020: 100), their production unavoidably renders visible the fine line between withholding information and already producing specific interpretations (2020: 117). The *Marble Statue Group of the Three Graces* exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, for example, elicited descriptions of striking variety: "One description didn't mention that the women were headless, while another implied a feminist perspective by noting that their bodies were idealized" (Watlington 2020). Indeed, as Eugenie Brinkema insists, all image descriptions suffer from three major risks: "that in attending to a single minute detail it overwhelms understanding through decontextualization; that in compiling an exhaustive catalogue of specificities it amasses a thicket of raw dangerous data […]; and that description, an ostensible site of objectivity, neutrality and accuracy, itself is constitutively mired in the deferral of linguistic games, revealing its own reliance on formal strategies of metaphor, trope, and so forth" (2019: 19). Considering descriptions as both foundational to most scientific disciplines and as a dynamic process influencing any hermeneutical activity, alt texts thus encourage us to reflect on our own practices of description, whether orally or in writing.

While epistemological potential of optics (Descartes 2001 [1637], Diderot 1999 [1749]) and literary image descriptions in analogue (Barthes 1977 [1961], Böhm 1995) or digital media (Brosch 2018) have been discussed widely in philosophy and media history individually, theorizing alt texts

poses significant questions about their interconnections. Alt texts call attention to the translatability of aesthetic elements from image to text and the powers and instabilities they, as practice of representation, unavoidably entail: What is made visible or discussable? What resists language? What is translated from image to text and what is inevitably lost? What is neutralized and what is highlighted? Discussing image descriptions, we thus suggest, is an opportunity to explore new ways of approaching fundamental questions about mimesis, aesthetics, ekphrastic poetics, epistemology, and close reading as well as the relationship of such topics to categories such as race and gender.

In our upcoming workshop **Theorizing Image Descriptions: Literature and/as Alt Text with Seo-Young Chu (CUNY)**, we aim to discuss alt texts as a tool for literary scholarship, tracing different techniques and methods of alt texts across different media. Drawing on disability studies and the emerging practice of design fiction, we will write simple alt texts of strategically selected images and produce templates for less easily accessible imagery (e.g., writing alt texts for the dreams we dream while asleep). Discussing 'literary alt texts' such as Marcel Proust's *Albertine Disparue* (1927), Margaret Atwood's "This is a Photograph of Me" (1964), or Italo Calvino's *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1973), we will expand literary concepts of representation (ekphrasis / mimesis) and form through the lens of alt text production. Lastly, with reference to Chu's research on representation (2010), we will join the epistemological and aesthetic potential of image descriptions and explore its potential significance for the practice of close reading by giving particular attention to descriptions of photographs from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's experimental autobiography *Dictee* (1982), screenshots of key moments in *Ghost in the Shell* (1995)*,* concrete poetry by Layli Long Soldier, A.I.-generated images and alt texts, and pictures of cats.

To attend the workshop, please register by email at **matteo.kobza@uzh.ch** by **June 2, 2024**. The workshop will be held in English.

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