

Audio description

The visual made verbal

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1. Introduction

Let us begin this discussion on audio description with a verbal version of a visual image. Consider the description that follows:

On a stage: at left, a woman in a flowing gown, her hands clasped in front of her, stands before a kneeling man in a doublet and feathered cap. He croons: “Why dost thy heart turn away from mine?” At right, a man at a microphone speaks: “Basically, the guy with the goofy hat is ticked because this babe has been runnin’ around with the dude in the black tights”. The caption reads: “Many opera companies now provide interpreters for the culturally impaired”.

Does it conjure a vivid image in your mind’s eye? You can visit the actual image being described on this volume’s accompanying DVD. Go to DVD > Snyder > Cartoon.

2. A brief history of audio description: Its beginnings in the USA

Audio description (AD) was developed in the United States. It was the subject of a Masters Thesis in San Francisco, California in the 1970’s by Frazier, who became the first to develop the concepts behind the act and the art of AD. Earlier still, in 1964, Chet Avery, a blind employee working in the Department of Education, knew of a grants program there for the captioning of films for deaf people. He suggested that descriptions be provided on films for blind people and encouraged blind consumer organisations to apply for financial support to provide AD on films. However, the organisations were at that time more focused on securing employment for blind people than in promoting accessibility to the media.

In 1980, Wayne White, House Manager at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, assembled a group of people to advise the theatre on accessibility issues. Avery was part of the group and spoke with Wayne White about description possibilities. Also a part of the group was Margaret Pfanstiehl, a blind woman who led The Metropolitan Washington Ear, a radio reading service catering for the blind. The Ear regularly used its studios to broadcast readings of newspapers and magazines to individuals who were blind or otherwise had little access to print. Already equipped with recording facilities and a crew of volunteer ‘voice talents,’ Pfanstiehl and her husband developed the world’s first ongoing audio description programme for the performing arts.

3. The art of audio description

To a great extent, audio description can be considered a kind of literary art form in itself, a type of poetry. It provides a verbal version of the visual whereby the visual is made verbal, aural, and oral. This is normally done using words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative in order to convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population (i.e. the blind and the partially sighted) and may not be fully realised by the rest of us, who can see but may not observe.

Using relatively unsophisticated technology, AD can enhance arts experiences for all people visiting exhibits in museums, theatregoers, and folks watching television at home or at the movies. It can also help improve children’s literacy skills. AD can be useful for anyone who wants to truly notice and appreciate a more full perspective on any visual event but it is especially helpful as an access tool for people who are blind or have low vision, and it can be found these days not only at arts events but also at weddings, parades, rodeos, circuses, sports events, and even funerals.

It might be easiest to see what audio description is all about by listening to an excerpt from the Iranian feature film *The Color of Paradise* (Majid Majidi 1999), first as it was screened in movie theatres with no description but as someone with no vision might experience it.

Exercise 1 *The Color of Paradise*

To listen to the soundtrack of this scene without any visuals go to: DVD > Snyder > *The Color of Paradise* > Audio only.

In a second stage, listen to the same excerpt but this time as described by the National Captioning Institute’s Described Media division by going to: DVD > Snyder > *The Color of Paradise* > AD.

An annotated script of the description for this excerpt, including timecodes, is also included as a pdf document on the accompanying DVD (DVD > Snyder > *The Color of Paradise* > Annotated script), but should be consulted only after experiencing the excerpts first without AD and then with AD. The notes will afford some insight into the reasoning as to why the precise language has been used; the words have been selected to bring certain images to your mind's eye.

A final clip, this time with the original soundtrack, the images and the AD, has also been included (DVD > Snyder > *The Color of Paradise* > AD) in order to allow sighted people to compare the actual description to the visual images in the film. Do the descriptions accurately reflect what can be seen on screen? Are the descriptions objective? Do they create vivid images in the viewer who does not have access to the video?

Bear in mind that the excerpt being used for this exercise comes from the middle of the film and the character of Mohammed, his physical person, would have already been described. However, after listening to the AD but before the actual video is played, it is interesting to ask people if they can glean any particular characteristics about Mohammed simply from the description of his interaction with his environment, the tree, and his surroundings.

Exercise 2 *The Color of Paradise*

As an additional exercise in preparing AD, it can be a good idea to have students watch the video clip without any description (DVD > Snyder > *The Color of Paradise* > Original). They can be asked to view the excerpt several times and develop their own version of an audio description script, taking care to write concisely, objectively, and vividly. It is also important to avoid voicing description whenever dialogue or, in this case, critical sound elements occur in the original soundtrack (Section 5).

4. Venues for audio description

In the United States, wherever a television station is equipped to participate, AD lets all blind television viewers hear what they cannot see. It is accessible via a special audio channel available on stereo televisions. Viewers select the SAP (Secondary Audio Program) channel in order to hear the original soundtrack accompanied by the descriptions, precisely timed in and out to occur only during the silent lapses between dialogue exchanges. Although this is mainly television for blind and low vision people, sighted viewers can also appreciate the descriptions when, for instance, they are in the kitchen washing dishes while the show is on. As confirmed by a landmark survey carried out by Packer and Kirchner (1997: online) for the American Foundation for the Blind: “individuals who are familiar with video description obtain numerous benefits from it”.

To a limited degree – in approximately 200 movie theatres nationwide – audio description is available for first-run film screenings. AD can also be found on several hundred VHS videotape titles (<http://main.wgbh.org/wgbh/pages/mag/resources/dvs-home-video-catalogue.html>) although the VHS format does not allow for the description to be turned off. DVDs are a far more suitable format since they allow for an audio menu and the ability to select description if desired. Unfortunately only about 80 titles currently offer description in the USA.

There are now federal provisions regarding AD – in particular Section 508 requiring description with government-produced media. A Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rule, established in 2002, created a mandate for compulsory description on broadcast television. It was set aside in a court challenge focused on whether the government agency exceeded its authority in ordering the mandate. But efforts are pending in the USA Congress to direct the FCC to re-establish the mandate just as captioning for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing has been required for most television broadcasts in the US for over a decade.

In live performing arts settings, AD is offered free, usually at designated performances. People desiring this service may receive headphones attached to small receivers, about the size of a cigarette pack. Prior to the show, a live or taped version of the programme notes is transmitted through the headphones after which, the trained describer narrates the performance from another part of the theatre via a radio or infra-red transmitter using concise, objective descriptions all slipped in between portions of dialogue or songs.

In museums, using AD techniques for the description of static images and exhibitions not only enhances accessibility, but it also helps develop more expressive, vivid, and imaginative museum tours. This enables docents to make the museum experience more meaningful for everyone, which is greatly appreciated by all visitors. Recorded AD tours, specifically geared to people with low vision, are increasingly common. Combined with directional information, these recorded tours enable visitors who are blind to use a simple hand-held audio player to tour at least a portion of the museum independently and with new access to the visual elements of exhibitions. Other curators are interested in having certain videos within an exhibit or a particular film described.

5. The skills of the professional audio describer

Having trained describers for many years, I think it might be of interest to learn what it takes to offer AD in ways that will be most useful. In developing AD for television, a video or DVD, the theatre, or a museum, I emphasise four elements, the first of which is all about the skill that Sherlock Holmes honed:

1. *Observation*: Baseball catcher and erstwhile philosopher, Yogi Berra, said it best when stating that one can see a lot just by looking. Effective describers must increase their level of awareness and become active ‘see-ers’, develop their ‘visual literacy’ as Schaefer (1995) calls it, notice the visual world with a heightened sense of acuity, and share those images. Keller (1993:online) puts it like it is: “Those who have never suffered impairment of sight or hearing seldom make the fullest use of these blessed faculties. Their eyes and ears take in all sights and sounds hazily, without concentration and with little appreciation”.
2. *Editing*: Describers must edit or cull from what they see, selecting what is most valid, what is most important, what is most critical to an understanding and appreciation of a visual image. In addition, choices are made based on an understanding of blindness and low vision – going from the general to the specific, use of colour, inclusion of directional information, and so on. For instance, as you sit in a classroom and look toward the front of the space: what would you focus on in a description of a snapshot of that image? If you had only five words to use, in priority order, what would you list? The chalkboard? A TV monitor? A clear desk? An open door? In considering a scene from a film, you can often be guided by the director or cinematographer who has provided clues: he or she has framed the image to direct the viewer toward certain elements, letting you know what is most important.
3. *Language*: Images must be transferred to words: objective, vivid, specific, imaginatively drawn terms, phrases, and metaphors. Is the Washington Monument 555 feet tall or is it as high as fifty elephants stacked one on top of the other? How many different words can be used to describe someone moving along a sidewalk? Why say ‘walk’ when you can more vividly describe the action with ‘sashay’, ‘stroll’, ‘skip’, ‘stumble’ or ‘saunter’? But good describers also strive for simplicity and succinctness since on many occasions ‘less is more’. In writing to a friend, Blaise Pascal (1657:online) once noted: “I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter”. While a describer must use language which helps people see vividly, and even see beyond what is readily apparent, it is also important to maintain a certain degree of objectivity. In this sense, describers must sum it up with the acronym ‘WYSIWYS’, i.e. ‘What You See Is What You Say’. The best audio describer is sometimes referred to as a ‘verbal camera lens’, able to objectively recount visual aspects of an exhibition or audiovisual programme. Qualitative judgments get in the way of a good AD, since they constitute a subjective interpretation on the part of the describer and are therefore unnecessary and unwanted. Listeners must be given the opportunity of conjuring their own

interpretations based on a commentary that is as objective as possible. Expressions like ‘he is furious’ or ‘she is upset’ ought to be avoided at all costs and replaced by descriptions such as ‘he’s clenching his fist’ or ‘she is crying’. The idea is to let the blind audience make their own judgments – perhaps their eyes do not work so well, but their brains and their interpretative skills are intact.

4. *Vocal skills*: Finally, in addition to building a verbal capability, the describer develops the vocal instrument through work with speech and oral interpretation fundamentals. Besides punctuation, we can also make meaning with our voices. One quick exercise I use involves the phrase ‘woman without her man is a savage’. If said aloud with a different punctuation and intonation, it can mean literally the opposite: ‘Woman: without her, man is a savage’.

Effective describers must learn to ‘re-see’ the world around them, to truly notice what is perceived with the eyes, and then express the pertinent aspects of those images with precise and imaginative language and vocal techniques that render the visual verbal.

While the United States can legitimately be considered the birthplace of audio description, the nations of Europe can just as credibly lay claim to being the principal developers of the technique, particularly within academia. Throughout Europe, AD is considered a form of audiovisual translation – a way to translate information that is perceptible in one sense (visual) to a form that is comparably accessible with another (aural). Accordingly, over the last five to ten years, academic offerings in AD have become a part of translation programs in the UK and Europe, whilst none exist in the United States to date. A sampling of these courses includes:

City University, London, UK

www.city.ac.uk/languages/courses/Audio_Description.html

Hoger Instituut voor Vertalers en Tolken, Antwerp, Belgium

www.hivt.be/home.htm

Roehampton University, London, UK

www.roehampton.ac.uk/pg/avt

University Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

www.fti.uab.es/pg.audiovisual

University Autònoma de Barcelona – online, Spain

www.fti.uab.es/onptav/angles/index_ang.htm

University of Granada, Spain

www.ugr.es/%7Edpto_ti/tablon_files/EXPERTO/Experto_subtitulacion_audiodescripcion.htm

University Jaume I, Castelló, Spain

www.uji.es

University of Surrey, UK

www.surrey.ac.uk/translation/pgprog/mainmonsubauddescription.htm

6. Audio description and literacy

Not too long ago I conducted a workshop with day care workers and reading teachers on what I think represents a new application for AD. We experimented with using more descriptive language when working with kids and picture books. Some of these books are deficient with respect to the language skills they involve since they rely mostly on the pictures to tell the story. However, the teacher trained in AD techniques would never simply hold up a picture of a red ball and read the text: ‘See the ball’. He or she might add: ‘The ball is red, just like a fire engine. I think that ball is as large as one of you! It’s as round as the sun, a bright red circle or sphere’.

The teacher has introduced new vocabulary, invited comparisons, and used metaphor or simile with toddlers. By using AD, I think that these books will be made accessible to kids who have low vision or are blind, and help develop more sophisticated language skills for all children. A picture is worth 1000 words? Maybe. But the audio describer might say that a few well-chosen words can conjure vivid and lasting images.

7. Concluding remarks: Access for all

The Second International Disability Awareness Film Festival, Breaking Down Barriers, held in Moscow on 11–14 November 2004, invested a portion of its limited resources to be certain that its presentations were accessible to attendees who are blind or have low vision. The same spirit exists in Sofia, Bulgaria, where audio description training has enabled performing arts activities to become accessible. In both countries, it would seem, audio description – access to the arts – is about democracy.

In the United States, a prosperous, democratic nation, accessibility is often not viewed as a right, as a reflection of the principles upon which the nation was founded. People in Sofia, St. Petersburg, and Moscow are wrestling with economic problems attendant to any new democracy, yet to them democracy means ‘access to everyone’. We have an immense and varied culture in the USA and there is no reason why a person with a visual disability must also be culturally disadvantaged.

All people need to be full participants in their nation's cultural life. It must be remembered that the 'able bodied' are only temporarily so: there is only a thin line between ability and disability. With a focus on people's abilities, we will come much closer to greater inclusion and total access. In addition, with the development of more well-trained practitioners on the art of audio description, we will come closer to making 'accessibility for all' a reality.