

Audio Description: The Visual Made Verbal

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*Abstract: Audio Description (AD) provides a verbal version of the visual for the benefit of people who are blind or have low vision. Succinct descriptions precisely timed to occur only during the pauses in dialogue or significant sound elements of performing arts or in media allows persons with vision impairments to have greater access to the images integral to a given work of art. AD enhances film and video, broadcast television, live performances and museum exhibitions--a wide range of human endeavor. While intended as an access technique, AD has been shown to be useful for anyone who wants to truly notice and appreciate a more full perspective on any visual event. For instance, by using audio description, children's books can be made accessible to kids who have low vision or are blind *and* can help develop more sophisticated language skills for all kids. A picture is worth 1000 words? Maybe. But the audio describer might say that a few well-chosen words conjure vivid and lasting images. This 60-minute workshop will introduce participants to the principles of audio description, how to produce quality description, and the importance of close communication with the "end users" - people who are blind or have low vision and all people who support this innovative use of technology to provide greater arts access.*

Keywords: Blindness, Accessibility, Media Art, Performing Arts

Introduction

WHAT BETTER WAY to begin a discussion of description than with a verbal version of a visual image:



Figure 1: Opera Description?!

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 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.”

A Brief History of Audio Description—Its Beginnings

Audio Description or AD was developed in the U.S. It was the subject of a Masters’ Thesis in San Francisco, California in the 1970’s by the late Gregory Frazier. Mr. Frazier was the first to develop the

concepts behind the act and the art of AD. Earlier still, however, in 1964, Chet Avery, a blind Department of Education employee, heard of a program there for the captioning of films for people who are deaf. He suggested that descriptions be provided on films for people who are blind and he subsequently encouraged blind consumer organizations to apply for support of AD on film. The organizations, however, were more focused on employment for people who are blind.

In 1980, Wayne White, the House Manager at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, assembled a group of people (including Mr. Avery and the Pfanstiehl) to advise the theater on accessibility issues. Mr. Avery spoke with Wayne White about description possibilities, they both discussed it with the Pfanstiehl, and from there the Washington Ear’s AD



THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE ARTS IN SOCIETY,
VOLUME 2, 2007

<http://www.arts-journal.com>, ISSN 1833-1866

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program was developed. I was already a volunteer reader at The Ear and a professional voice talent/actor and English teacher.

For over 20 years I have been working with AD and since that time I have been fortunate enough to help performing arts groups, media producers, museums, schools, libraries, and other venues all around the world and on the web develop AD programs. I do it now on behalf of the National Captioning Institute for broadcast media and through my own company, Audio Description Associates, through which I focus principally on description in performing arts settings, museums, and training.

The Art of Audio Description

Audio Description is a kind of literary art form in itself, to a great extent. It's a type of poetry--a haiku. It provides a verbal version of the visual the visual is made verbal, and aural, and oral. AD uses words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative to convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population and not fully realized by the rest of us—sighted folks who see but who may not observe.

Using relatively unsophisticated technology, AD can enhance arts experiences for all people experiencing exhibits in museums, theater-goers, folks watching television or at the movies, and can even improve kids' literacy skills. It's 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. You'll find it these days at arts events but also at weddings, parades, rodeos, circuses, sports events, even funerals!

During this paper's presentation, I invited session participants to "see" what description is all about by figuratively closing their eyes and listening to an excerpt from the feature film *The Color of Paradise*. First, I played it with no picture on the screen and no description—just as someone with no vision might experience it if he or she had no access to description. Then I played the same excerpt as described by the National Captioning Institute's Described Media division; and finally, one last time with the video intact so viewers could make their own judgments about how well we did with the description.

Here I provide an annotated version of the description script for this film excerpt. The notes may afford some insight into our reasoning as to why we used the precise language we used—why we chose the words we selected to bring images to your mind's eye. Please read and see --

Annotated Audio Description Script for the Color of Paradise

Cues in CAPS; descriptions preceded by ">>." Annotations are in bold, keyed to numerals in description text.

Notes:

- The appearance of the character "Mohammed" is described earlier in the film.
- Throughout this excerpt, for the most part, descriptions are written to be read "in real time." i.e., as the action being described occurs on screen. However, in many films descriptions may precede the action on occasion. This is a useful convention – it accommodates timing required in films with a great deal of dialogue and allows description users the opportunity to know "what happened" moments before the action occurs.

1 – 01:01:36:12 00:00:10:26 --:--:--:--

>> Mohammed kneels and taps his hands through the thick ground cover of brown 1.

1 Color has been shown to be important to people with low vision, even people who are congenitally blind. curled leaves.

2 01:01:46:16 00:00:00:23 --:--:--:--

...[CHIRPING/RUSTLING :02]

3 01:01:48:16 00:00:04:04 --:--:--:--

>> A scrawny nestling struggles on the ground near Mohammed's hand.

4 01:01:52:19 00:00:00:23 --:--:--:--

...[GASP/CHIRPING: 02] 2.

2 – Timing is critical in the crafting of description. We weave descriptive language around a film's sound elements.

5 01:01:54:19 00:00:15:00 --:--:--:--

>> His palm hovers above the baby bird. He lays his hand lightly over the tiny creature. Smiling, Mohammed curls his fingers around the chick and scoops 3.

3. – Vivid verbs help conjure images in the mind's eye.

it into his hands. He stands and strokes its nearly featherless head with a fingertip.

6 01:02:08:12 00:00:00:23 --:--:--:--

...[CHIRPING/RUSTLE: 01]

7 01:02:09:12 00:00:17:19 --:--:--

>> Mohammed starts as the bird nips his finger. He taps 4. his finger on the chick's gaping beak. He tilts 4. his head back,

4. – Description, like much poetry, is written to be heard. Alliteration adds variety and helps to maintain interest

then drops it forward. Mohammed tips 4. the chick into his front shirt pocket. Wrapping his legs and arms around a tree trunk, Mohammed climbs.

8 01:02:28:10 00:00:01:04 --:--:--
...[HEAVY BREATHING/CLIMBING: 11]
9 01:02:39:10 00:00:17:19 --:--:--

>> He latches onto a tangle of thin, upper branches. His legs flail for a foothold. Mohammed stretches an arm between a fork in the trunk of the tree and wedges in his head and shoulder. His shoes slip on the rough bark.

10 01:02:55:11 00:00:00:23 --:--:--
...[SCRAPING :03]
11 01:02:58:11 00:00:16:04 --:--:--

>> He wraps his legs around the lower trunk, then uses his arms to pull himself higher. He rises into thicker foliage and holds onto tangles of smaller branches. Gaining his footing, Mohammed stands upright and cocks his head to one side.

12 01:03:13:20 00:00:01:04 --:--:--
...[CHIRPING/FLUTTER]
13 01:03:18:15 00:00:10:15 --:--:--

>> An adult bird flies from a nearby branch, 5.

5 – What to include? This image is important—the adult bird returns in the next scene.

Mohammed extends an open hand. He touches a branch and runs his fingers over wide, green leaves.

14 01:03:27:11 00:00:00:23 --:--:--
...[RUSTLING :03]
15 01:03:30:11 00:00:14:08 --:--:--

>> He pats his hand down the length of the branch. His fingers trace the

smooth bark of the upper branches, search the network of connecting tree limbs, and discover their joints.

16 01:03:43:20 00:00:00:23 --:--:--
...[RUSTLE :02]
17 01:03:45:20 00:00:05:06 01:03:50:26

>> Above his head, Mohammed's fingers find a dense mass of woven twigs--a bird's nest.

18 01:03:50:26 00:00:00:23 --:--:--
...[CHIRPING :03]
19 01:03:53:26 00:00:07:15 --:--:--

>> Smiling, he removes the chick from his shirt pocket and drops it gently into the nest beside another fledgling.

20 01:04:01:00 00:00:00:23 --:--:--
...[CHIRPING :03]
21 01:04:03:04 00:00:13:04 --:--:--

>> He rubs the top of the chick's head with his index 6.

6 – Be specific-- precision creates images!

finger. Mohammed wiggles his finger like a worm 7. and taps a chick's open beak. Smiling, he

7 – Similes paint pictures!

slowly lowers his hand.

Venues for Audio Description

In the United States, in areas where a television station is equipped to participate, AD lets all television viewers to hear what they cannot see. It's accessible via a special audio channel available on stereo televisions. Viewers select the SAP (secondary audio program) channel in order to hear the regular program audio accompanied by the descriptions, precisely timed to occur only during the lapses between dialogues. Sighted viewers appreciate the descriptions as well. It's television for blind, low vision and sighted people who want to be in the kitchen washing dishes while the show is on.

To a limited degree—in approximately 200 movie theaters nationwide—audio description is available for first-run film screenings; similarly, description can be found on several hundred VHS videotape titles although the VHS format doesn't allow for the description to be turned off. DVDs are a far more suitable format, allowing for an audio menu, and the

ability to select description if desired; unfortunately only several dozen DVD titles currently offer description.

There are now federal provisions regarding AD, in particular Section 508 requiring description with government-produced media, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rule, currently under review. In 2002, the FCC mandated description for broadcast television several years ago but that rule was successfully challenged by the television and film industry in the courts. Now the US Congress is considering legislation that would reinstate the mandate just as captioning has been required for most television broadcasts in the US for over 20 years.

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 program notes is transmitted through the headphones after which, the trained describer narrates the performance from another part of the theater via a radio or infrared 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, docents find that they develop better use of language and more expressive, vivid, and imaginative museum tours, greatly appreciated by all visitors. In this way, docent-led tours are more appropriate for the lowvision visitor and docents find that their regular tours are enhanced. A lively and vivid descriptive process enables docents to make the museum experience more accessible and more meaningful for everyone.

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 handheld 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.

The Audio Describer

I have trained describers in twelve different states and six different countries and I thought it might be of some interest to learn what it takes to offer description in ways that will be most useful.

I recall being simply amazed when I first encountered Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's brilliant detective, Sherlock Holmes. Brilliant ... and incredibly observant. In developing AD for television, a video, for theater, for a museum – in any context – I empha-

size four elements, the first of which is all about the skill that Sherlock Holmes honed:

1. Observation: The great philosopher Yogi Berra said it best: "You can see a lot just by looking." An effective describer must increase his level of awareness and become an active "see-er," develop his "visual literacy," notice the visual world with a heightened sense of acuity, and share those images. Miss Helen Keller told it like it is she said, "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: Next, 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 an event. In addition, choices are made based on an understanding of blindness and low vision going from the general to the specific, use of color, inclusion of directional information, and so on.
3. Language: We transfer it all to words--objective, vivid, specific, imaginatively drawn words, 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 you use 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, succinctness "less is more." In writing to a friend, Blaise Pascal 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 folks see vividly--and even see beyond what's readily apparent--it's important to maintain a degree of objectivity--describers sum it up with the acronym "WYSIWYS": "What You See Is What You Say."

The best audio describer is sometimes referred to as a "verbal camera lens," objectively recounting visual aspects of an exhibition. Qualitative judgments get in the way they constitute a subjective interpretation on the part of the describer and are unnecessary and unwanted. Let listeners conjure their own interpretations based on a commentary that is as objective as possible. So you don't say "He is furious" or "She is upset." Rather, "He's clenching his fist" or "She is crying." The idea is to let the audience make

their own judgments perhaps their eyes don't 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. We make meaning with our voices one quick exercise I use involves the phrase:

Woman without her man is a savage.

Say it aloud so that it means just the opposite:

Woman: Without her, man is a savage.

So, effective describers must learn to "re-see" the world around us to truly notice what it 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.

Audio Description and Literacy

Not too long ago I conducted a workshop in New Haven with day care workers and reading teachers on what I think represents a new application for audio description. We experimented with developing more descriptive language to use when working w/ kids and picture books. Some of these books are deficient with respect to the language skills they involve -- they rely on the pictures to tell the story. But the teacher trained in audio description 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 audio description, 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 kids. 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.

About the Author

Joel Snyder

Joel Snyder is known internationally as one of the first audio describers. He began describing arts events in 1980 with the world's first ongoing audio description service in Washington, DC. His work made hundreds of live theater productions accessible to visually impaired audience members; in media, Mr. Snyder used the same technique to enhance PBS' American Playhouse productions, ABC and Fox network broadcasts, feature films, the IMAX film "Blue Planet" and the Planetarium show "And A Star To Steer Her By" at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum. As Director of Described Media for the National Captioning Institute, he leads a staff that produces description for nationally broadcast films and television series including "Sesame Street" and DVDs. Mr. Snyder's Audio Description Associates develops AD tours for museums throughout the United States including the Enabling Garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden, the National Aquarium in Baltimore

and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Internationally, he introduced description techniques in Japan, Israel, Romania, Spain, Portugal, Lithuania, Norway and Finland; conducted description workshops in London, Prague, and St. Petersburg, Russia; and trained describers for first-ever audio description programs in Sofia, Bulgaria and Moscow, Russia.

Indeed, at NCI Described Media we're quite proud to be the folks who provide description -- for the first time -- for Sesame Street. We were quite heartened by a particular letter we received last year from a blind parent of sighted children who for the first time could follow along with her kids the antics of Elmo, Bert, Ernie, and all the other denizens of Sesame Street.

Access for All

Over the past twenty years, I have considered it quite a privilege to train describers and do AD workshops in twenty states in the United States and in nine countries around the world, most recently in Moscow for the 2nd Annual Moscow International Disability Film Festival. I mention that because I want to share with you a strong impression from three days of training I conducted there -- and I found the same sort of spirit several years earlier when I conducted five days of training in Sofia, Bulgaria. In both countries, the trainees and my hosts taught me that audio description, access to the arts, is about Democracy. Here I am, coming from the United States, a prosperous, democratic nation, and yet accessibility in the U.S. is often not viewed as a right, as a reflection of the principles upon which our nation was founded. People in Sofia, Bulgaria, in St. Petersburg, and in Moscow are wrestling with economic problems attendant to any new democracy, yet to them democracy means "access to everyone." I learned that from my friends there and I share that wonderfully inclusive notion with you here.

We have an immense and varied culture in the United States. 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" among us 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.