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Audio description: The visual made verbal

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Abstract. Audio Description (AD) allows persons with visual impairments to hear what cannot be seen at theater performances, on film and video, in museum exhibitions—in a wide range of human endeavor. Audio describers provide services in myriad settings, including multi-media events, educational venues, at circuses, rodeos, ice skating exhibitions, sports events, and on Internet web sites. AD provides a verbal version of the visual—the visual is made verbal, aural, and oral for the benefit of people who are blind or have low vision. But it 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 young ones who have low vision or are blind *and* more sophisticated language skills can be developed for all young people. A picture is worth 1000 words? Maybe. But the audio describer might say that a few well-chosen words conjure vivid and lasting images.

Keywords: Audio description; Blindness; Low vision; Audiovisual translation

1. Introduction

What better way to begin a discussion of description than with a verbal version of a visual image (Fig. 1).

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

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Fig. 1. Opera description.

tights." The caption reads: "Many opera companies now provide interpreters for the culturally impaired."

2. A brief history of audio description—its beginnings

Audio Description or AD was developed in the US. It was the subject of a Masters' Thesis in San Francisco, California in the 1970s 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 Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl) to advise the theater on accessibility issues. Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl (then Dr. Margaret Rockwell) founded The Metropolitan Washington Ear, a closed-circuit radio reading service for people who are blind or for those who do not otherwise have access to print. Mr. Avery spoke with Wayne White about description possibilities, they both discussed it with the Pfanstiehls, and from there the Washington Ear's AD program was developed. I was already a volunteer reader at The Ear, and a professional voice talent/actor and English teacher. I became one of the first audio describers in Ear's program, the first ongoing audio description service.

For 25 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 on description in performing arts settings, museums, and training.

3. The art of audio description

Audio Description is a kind of literary art form in itself, to a great extent. It is a type of poetry—a haiku. It provides a verbal version of the visual—the visual is made verbal, and

aural, and oral. Using words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative, AD conveys the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population and not fully realized by the rest of us—the rest of us, sighted folks who see but who may not observe.

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

It might be easiest for you to *see* what description is all about by having you *listen* to an excerpt from the feature film "The Color of Paradise," first as it was screened in movie theaters with no description—just as someone with no vision might experience it. Then the same excerpt will play as described by the National Captioning Institute's Described Media division. Now, listen and see supplementary data on the appendix.

4. Venues for audio description

In the United States, in areas where a television station is equipped to participate, AD lets all television viewers hear what they cannot see. It is accessible via a special audio channel available on stereo televisions. Viewers selecting the SAP (secondary audio program) channel hear the regular program audio accompanied by the descriptions, precisely timed to occur only during the lapses between dialogue. Sighted viewers appreciate the descriptions as well. It is 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 using infrared sound transmission and receivers; similarly, description can be found on several hundred VHS videotape titles. 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 in the United States regarding AD, in particular Section 508 requiring description with government-produced media. The Federal Communications Commission had 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 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 then the trained describer narrates the performance from another part of the theater via an FM 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. Docent-led tours are more appropriate for the low-vision visitor but 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. Sometimes an AD layer is added to an existing digital wand or CD museum audio tour or AD enhancement is made to language used in a "one size fits all" tour. An AD tour, combined with directional information, can 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. 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 with young children 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, these books are made accessible to children who have low vision or are blind *and* more sophisticated language skills are developed for all our young ones. 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.

Indeed, at NCI Described Media we are 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 children the antics of Elmo, Bert, Ernie, and all the other denizens of Sesame Street.

6. Access for all

Recently I trained describers in Moscow for the 2nd Annual Moscow International Disability Film Festival. I came away with a strong impression from 3 days of training I conducted there—and I found the same sort of spirit several years earlier when I conducted 5 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. I came from the United States, a prosperous, democratic nation, and yet accessibility in the US is often *not* viewed as a right, as a reflection of the principles upon which our nation was founded. The people I worked with 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.

My final point. We have an immense and varied culture in the United States. That is certainly true here in London and in all countries around the world. 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. With a focus on people's abilities, we will come much closer to greater inclusion and total access.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.ics.2005.05.215.