

# **A Comparative Study of Audio Description Guidelines Prevalent in Different Countries**

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# Introduction

Audio description is an additional commentary between the dialogue of a film/ television programme that tells the viewer what is happening on the screen so that he/ she is able to keep up with the action. It bridges the gap in accessibility for a blind or a partially sighted person when watching a film/ TV programme.

In an attempt to achieve qualitative improvement in film/ television description being produced in the UK, Independent Television Commission (ITC) in 2000 rolled out a code giving guidance on how description should be written and produced (ITC guidelines). This code was updated in 2006 by Ofcom and is now available as Ofcom's Code on Television Access Services. Aside from the UK, a number of countries such as Germany, France, Spain, Sweden, Belgium and Greece also rolled out their guidelines/ standards/ codes for the production of AD in their countries. More similar than different in nature, these guidelines/ standards/codes as the authorities choose to call them, provide guidance on standards for the production and presentation of audio description. This paper draws comparisons and similarities between six sets of existing AD guidelines from 6 different countries - UK, Greece, France, Germany, Spain and American Council of the Blind's ADP project's ADI standards.

## 1. Can it be described?

This could perhaps serve as the starting point for a discussion on AD - are all programmes/ filmed materials suitable for AD? The Spanish, Greek and ADI guidelines don't mention anything at all with regards to suitability of material for description; the German and the French standards/ guidelines are in agreement on the principle that no filmed material can be deemed unsuitable as television/film preferences of BPS people are as eclectic in nature as anyone else's. However, the UK Ofcom guidelines are only in partial agreement to the above and state that " some programmes are too fast-moving, or offer little opportunity to insert AD (e.g. news), or may not be significantly enhanced by the provision of AD (e.g. quiz programmes)."

## **2. Intended users of audio described material**

Following on from the above, the second most crucial question that needs answering before one can get down to the actual nuances of production of AD, is the target audience for audio described material. As per the ADI standards, "audio description is targeted at individuals who are living with some degree of vision loss. Most users of description are not totally blind; most at one point had all or some of their sight and now they may only have peripheral vision. They may be able to identify only shapes, light and dark, colours, movement, shadows...". The UK Ofcom guidelines supports this theory and add that audio describers should take account of the fact that most potential users of AD will have some sight, or will have had sight at some stage. The Spanish UNE standard, however, asserts that description must mainly foresee the information need of the group who most needs it: people who are totally blind, which therefore helps the remaining people with visual impairment, as well. The French Charter on AD aside from blind and partially sighted people goes on to include elderly people, sick people who are sometimes bothered by the rapidity of the moving image, foreigners who are still learning the language and anyone else who might be sighted but would only like to listen to a film/ television programme in the target audience for audio described material.

## **3. What to describe**

One of the hardest questions for a describer is - what to describe - what to include - what not to include - in what order - and how to prioritise the given information. The common denominator across all the guidelines is that description should only be added during pauses in a film/ TV programme and at no cost should the description undermine the film/ television programme. In conjunction with the advice in the German standards, "a description should really only follow when the film is completely silent, so when there is no dialogue or noise or music. However, this hardly ever happens and therefore one has to make a decision to speak over music and also some noises. In doing this, one has to continually question whether the precise place in which one wants to talk over the audio fulfils an important function in terms of the mood and atmosphere and thus whether it should remain undisturbed. Music and sounds are also part of the language of a film!"

All guidelines/ standards are consistent in their advice on what to describe and break it down into four major components - when, where, who and what - must be a part of the description. The UK Ofcom guidelines further go on to elaborate, "to the extent relevant to the storyline, AD should describe characters, locations, time and circumstances, any sounds that are not readily identifiable, on-screen action and on-screen information."

All the guidelines also include noises that cannot be identified immediately, sub-titles, signs, written messages, significant symbols, and front and/or end credits amongst the things that should be included in the description. The UK Ofcom code also suggests that when describing locations, one should include time of the day/ season and date setting which could also help establish a change in the scene. The German guidelines recommend that if a film or a montage is in black/ white, it would be appropriate to mention 'in black and white' as most people who were not born blind would be able to construct a visual image.

### **3.1 Character description**

As per the UK Ofcom guidelines, "identifying and describing characters is vital to effective AD." The German standards further advise the describers to "give supplementary information about the characters who will be important as the film progresses. If possible, they should be described in more detail than others: age, hair colour, height, facial expression and gestures." This may be construed as cheating since a blind viewer could end up with more information than the sighted viewer right at the beginning but by the time a sighted viewer realizes who the main characters are, it might be too late to describe them so time and again, this is a decision that will need to be taken by the describer."

The ADI guidelines caution the describer that though it might be worthwhile talking about the relationship of the characters, it should only be done if it has been revealed in the film. The UK Ofcom guidelines encourage the describer to refer to the characters by their names rather than refer to them as 'he or she' especially when there are several characters on the screen at the same time.

### **3.1.1 Naming the characters**

The UK Ofcom guidelines propose that the names of the characters should not be given away if the plot requires the character's identity to be revealed at a later date. Practically speaking, descriptions produced in the UK, often choose to name their characters at the beginning of the story unless it is crucial to the plot. This is not only done for the convenience of the describer but also to avoid long drawn phrases such as 'the man with long blond hair' in the description which could potentially confuse the viewer. The German guidelines however find this debateable and suggest that a character should really only be named once he or she has had their name mentioned in the film. Until then, the person continues to be 'The man with the hat', 'the woman with the dog', etc. But occasionally, there will be films which take a long time to name even the important characters. In this situation, the describer will want to intervene, and decide to name as early as possible important characters who are not named until late in the film (maybe within the first 10 mins of the film). The French and Greek standards agree with the German guidelines and discourage describers to name the characters before they have been named in the film.

### **3.1.2 Mentioning the ethnicity of the character**

The ADI and the Greek standards clearly state that ethnicity/race must be identified as if it is known to be vital to the comprehension of content. If it is, then all main characters' skin colours must be described - light-skinned, dark-skinned, or olive-skinned. Citing the race only of non-white individuals establishes "white" as a default and is unacceptable. The UK Ofcom code, however, only mentions that race/ethnicity should only be mentioned if necessary.

**Note:** However it is noteworthy that regional differences would play an important part in this decision, whether or not to mention ethnicities. In certain countries i.e., South Africa, it would be unacceptable and could be construed as impolite or even offensive to mention race or ethnicities unless crucial to the plot of the film or the television programme.

## **3.2 Anticipation**

On the subject of anticipation, the Spanish UNE standards suggest that events in the plot must not be revealed or told beforehand, nor

must situations of dramatic tension, suspense or mystery be disturbed. The ADI guidelines refer to this technique of anticipation as 'foreshadowing', and allow a describer to describe something before it appears on the screen if there is no pause later on when it actually makes an appearance. They also encourage the describer to omit a less significant description of what's onscreen in order to interject a critical piece of description. The German guidelines suggest the same, and permit the describer to talk about a critical piece of information perhaps a few seconds before the described event actually happens; if it is impossible to do otherwise.

On the subject of anticipation, the UK Ofcom code states that wherever possible, the describer should try to describe the action at the same time as it occurs, "this is particularly important with regards to comic situations, where the audience, sighted and visually impaired, should be able to laugh at the same time." Also, they go on to suggest that "where relevant, key back-references can be included as they may be necessary to set up the next scene during the current description."

### **3.3 Censorship**

Though, this topic will concern and bother almost every single describer at one point or another, it has been addressed only in the UK Ofcom and the Spanish UNE guidelines. Both the standards suggest that the describer should not censor the description and describe what is on screen. The information provided by the image must be respected, neither censoring nor cutting out any supposed excesses or complementing any supposed deficiencies.

However, the Ofcom code advises against the usage of offensive language, unless when referring to content that is integral to understanding of the programme.

### **3.4 Language of the script**

This topic has been discussed in detail across all guidelines included in this paper and all of them seem to be in complete agreement in what they suggest.

- The style of writing in the script must be fluent with simple phrases.
- Information included in the description must be appropriate for the type of target audience for a specific show/ film. The

language/ choice of vocabulary used must suit the tone of the film. The German guidelines also suggest that one should tune one's ear to the intonation of the dialogue and the mood of the film, in order to find the right language for the descriptions as well.

- The UK Ofcom guidelines suggests that since AD provides a real-time commentary, so it should generally be in the present tense (he sits), the continuous present (he is sitting) or the present participle ('Standing at the window, he lets out a deep sigh'), as appropriate.
- Variety is important, particularly with verbs. 'She scuttles into the room' rather than the simple fact 'She enters the room' creates a clearer image for the viewer (a thesaurus is always useful).
- Use of technical terms (i.e., camera angles) is discouraged and should only be used very sparingly.
- Adverbs can be useful when describing emotions and actions, but should not be subjective. In fact the German guidelines state that all the words chosen should be as impartial as possible - so that the viewer has a chance to make up his own decision i.e., instead of saying a hideous blue dress, one could dress the dress - blue in colour with lots silver thread work and large golden buttons. The same rule applies to facial expressions as well. The ADI guidelines also advise against making any generalised statements in the description such as 'the attic is cluttered' and suggests that specificity creates images in the mind to a far greater degree than a general reference. The Ofcom code in contradiction suggests the describers not to shy away from using terms as pretty/handsome where relevant to the story.
- The Spanish UNE standard suggests that specific adjectives can be used, but avoiding those of an imprecise meaning.
- Upon creating AD, one must avoid causing the visually impaired listener to become tired due to saturation of information or anxiety due to a lack of information.
- Use of Colours: the UK Ofcom code encourages describers to mention colours during description but the French Charter on audio description suggests that colours should only be mentioned if they can be completed with an adjective. This has also been mentioned in the ADI guidelines that significance of colours can be understood by association to certain words i.e.,

red is considered to carry the association of intensity, rage, rapacity, and fierceness.

- Avoid the term 'we see'.

The UK Ofcom code also mentions that, "for Children's programmes, the language and the pace of delivery for children's TV need more care. A more intimate style may be more appropriate."

#### **4. What not to describe**

The ADI guidelines sum up this section quite well, "description cannot and need not convey every visual image on display. Quality audio description is not a running commentary. Listeners should be allowed to hear actors' voices, sound effects, music, and ambiance—or experience silence throughout the description."

The French Charter, also explicitly states that BPS people do not need description of everything because they can hear the dialogue, the sound effects, audible emotions.

The German and the UK Ofcom guidelines go on to state that description should only be given when absolutely necessary or when there is really anything to say otherwise the film soundtrack and the general ambiance should be given a chance.

#### **5. Voicing of audio description**

The German guidelines don't mention anything about the production or delivery of audio description but the Ofcom code, the French charter, Greek guidelines, and the UNE Spanish standards cover detailed information in delivery technique.

The UK Ofcom code states that "the delivery should be steady, unobtrusive and impersonal in style, so that the personality and views of the describer do not colour the programme. However, it can be important to add emotion, excitement, lightness of touch at different points in different programmes to suit the mood and the plot development – the style should be matched to the genre of the programme." This has been repeated in the French Charter which adds that, "the voice must be adapted to the emotional content of the scene and the pace of action but must nevertheless remain fairly neutral. If an actor with too strong a personality is used, he will be competing with the actor in the film." It goes on to advise that the voices of two actors, a woman and a man, are

recommended. They can be used to indicate a change of place and time, and for sub-titles. If voice over is used in the original work, it may be preferable to only use only one voice, of the opposite sex."

The UK Ofcom code also suggests that the same people should be used to describe a series of programme, both to ensure a consistent style and because the description forms a part of the programme for users. It has been recommended in all the guidelines mentioned above that, "the diction should be clear and not hurried – every word should be clear, audible and timed carefully so that it does not overrun subsequent dialogue. The aim should be to enhance the enjoyment of a programme not to distract from it." The Greek guidelines suggest a 20-second rule to the describer where in it is unadvisable to allow more than 20 seconds to go by without any audio description.

The Spanish UNE standards also mention that, "the narrator must be selected according to the type of voices (male or female, adult or child) and the proper tone for each work.

- For children's works, it is recommended that the narrator use the proper intonation for children, which can be somewhat more expressive.
- For works with a predominance of female performers, it is recommended to use a male voice, and vice versa."

## **6. Conclusion and recommendations**

Though, in principal the guidelines and/or standards studied in this paper are very similar in nature, there are minor differences in a few of the recommendations. These differences could potentially be because of different formats of film/ television programming being produced in different countries, different ways of watching films/ television programmes, cultural differences leading to relative levels of understanding of set-ups specific to different films/ television programmes and also different ways in which audio description is made available i.e. through products specifically targeted at blind or partially sighted people or as an alternative sound track via mainstream services.

The only major difference that jumps out of this comparison is the advice about naming of characters. The UK Ofcom code recommends that unless it is crucial to hold the names back in

relation to the plot, the characters should be named as soon as the story starts. This is not only done for the convenience of the describer but also, to avoid long drawn phrases such as 'the man with long blond hair' which could potentially confuse the viewer. But the German guidelines insist that unless the character is not named until very late in the film, then the character can be named sometime during the first 10 minutes of the film. The ADI guidelines, in principle, also agree with the German guidelines in this context.

The other significant variance lies in the use of language as suggested in the guidelines; the UK Ofcom code suggests the describers not to shy away from using terms as pretty/ handsome where relevant to the story but the German guidelines and the ADI standards recommend that only impartial phrases be used during description and instead, a well versed description be provided, which in effect will give the audience the freedom to make up his/her own mind about the character.

Aside from these, the only other difference that becomes apparent is the mention of colours during description. As per the French Charter and the ADI guidelines, colours should preferably be mentioned when they can accompanied by adjectives or other words of association, whereas the UK Ofcom guidelines do not in any way stop the describer from using colours in their description.

However, all the guidelines studied as part of this paper converge in principle, and advice the describer that it is not essential to add description to every single pause during the course of a film; instead it may be significant to preserve as many pieces of noise, music, and sometimes even silences to retain the overall impact of a film. A description only needs to translate those actions into words that cannot be understood or heard by a blind or a partially sighted person.

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# **Annexe 1: Spanish Standard UNE 153020**

[Translated into English from Spanish]

## **Title: Audio description for the visually impaired Requirements for audio description and production of audio guides**

**Audio description for visually impaired people**

**Guidelines for audio description procedures and for the  
preparation of audio guides**

### **Introduction**

Audiovisual shows and productions are, without a doubt, one of the cultural expressions which have had the greatest importance since the final quarter of the last century. Cinema, theatre, television and video have attracted more attention and interest amongst viewers.

The increasing importance of images has taken on the starring role at such events, which is why people with visual impairment have, to a great extent, been marginalized from access to these new forms of culture.

However, theatrical and cultural spaces (museums, exhibitions, natural parks, etc.), with their important visual facets, are in large part beyond the reach of blind people and the visually impaired, and therefore it has become necessary to examine this problem, so as to achieve a solution that provides complementary information in a sound format, which is required in these cases.

For more than a decade, some entities and companies have taken interest in these problems and, through sound-based explanations of images; they have brought cultural expressions of an audiovisual nature (theatre, cinema, television, cultural spaces) closer to the blind and the visually impaired.

The experience achieved through the work carried out in recent years, given form in the creation of audio-descriptive productions of various types (plays, documentaries, television series, adapted audio guides), as well as the contributions by blind users through their suggestions, has allowed for the gradual perfection of the audio description technique and its accessible products. This

experience has made it possible to produce this UNE Standard, in which the quality requirements are established for audio descriptions, which must be taken into account by all those institutions, companies and professionals that work to produce audio description productions.

This UNE standard is the result of consensus amongst users, government, audio description and audio guide production companies, television broadcasters and industry professionals. Especially taken into account are the opinions, preferences and experiences of the blind and visually impaired as a group, as well as the professionals who specialize in providing this service of support for communication.

## **1 Purpose and Scope of Applicability**

This UNE standard establishes the basic requirements which must be taken into account by those who create audio-described productions for people with visual impairment.

The requirements for audio descriptions established in this UNE standard are applicable to the following types of productions:

- Productions broadcast on television: movies, series, documentaries, etc.
- Productions recorded in any medium: movies, series, documentaries, etc.
- Films in movie theatres.
- Live shows: theatre, concerts, etc.
- Monuments: churches, palaces, etc.
- Museums and exhibitions.
- Natural areas and thematic spaces: natural parks, theme parks, etc.

## **2 Terms and Definitions**

For the purpose of this UNE standard, the following terms and definitions will be applicable:

**2.1 Audio description:** Service to support communication which consists of the ensemble of techniques and skills used with the purpose of offsetting the lack of perception of the visual portion of any type of message, by supplying adequate sound-based information which translates or explains it, in such a way that the potential visually impaired recipient does perceive that message as

a harmonic whole, in the manner most resembling the way in which a seeing person perceives it.

**NOTE** The criteria established in this UNE standard are valid for audio descriptions intended for blind and visually impaired persons, though people with no visual impairment may also benefit from them (see Section 3.1).

**2.2 Adapted audio guide:** Structured sound-based description that allows people with visual impairment to gain access to items of artistic, cultural and natural heritage: exhibitions, monuments, natural spaces and thematic spaces.

**2.3 Information bubble or descriptive unit:** Each of the descriptions that are inserted into the message spaces. They only contain the information necessary to explain the relevant visual aspects for a more complete perception of the work.

**2.4 Braille:** Writing system that allows the blind to read. It consists of a matrix of six raised dots, the combinations of which make up the letters and other symbols, which can be perceived using the sense of touch.

**2.5 Caption:** Identifying label on an exhibited object, with its basic information, including the author of the work, the title, dimensions, materials and date.

**2.6 Describer; audio describer; script writer:** Person who writes the script of the audio description.

**2.7 Setting:** Location suggested by the sum of visual elements which play a role in a theatrical performance. It is fundamentally determined by the stage crafting and lighting, but also by the movement of the actors and even the audience, when it is made to intervene.

**2.8 Message space:** Useful space for placing “information bubbles.” This space must be free of dialogue and sounds relevant to the understanding of the work.

**2.9 Narrator:** Person who reads the narration of the script of the audio description.

**2.10 Macro-characters:** Letters of a larger size than those used commonly in printed texts, which make it possible for persons with usable vestiges of vision to read.

**2.11 Mono-aural:** Having one single audio channel.

**2.12 Production; work; audiovisual:** Cultural expressions of an audiovisual nature, including films, series, documentaries for the cinema, television, video, Internet or recorded in any medium, live shows such as plays, concerts, etc., or monuments, churches, palaces, museums and exhibitions, natural spaces and thematic spaces.

### **3 Generalities Regarding Audio Descriptions**

#### **3.1 Persons for whom audio descriptions are intended**

The audio descriptions governed by this UNE standard are mainly intended for the blind, whether completely blind or with some vestiges of vision, and with congenital or acquired blindness. In any case, audio descriptions must mainly foresee the information needs of the group of people who most need them: people who are completely blind, which therefore helps the remaining people with visual impairment, as well.

Moreover, audio descriptions benefit people with problems of perception and cognition.

Audio descriptions also help the rest of the population with no visual impairment, in those situations in which visual information is not available: audio-described productions in an audio format and audio guides for cultural and natural spaces.

#### **3.2 The audio description process and audio description requirements**

The audio description of any work or show entails the fulfilment of the requirements that are listed below. These requirements are applicable to all audio-described productions, such as cinema, television, video, Internet, live shows and audio guides.

**3.2.1 Prior analysis of the work.** It must be taken into account that, due to their characteristics, not all works allow for the production of a proper audio description. Therefore, a prior viewing must be carried out that makes it possible to evaluate whether the

cultural work or expression selected can be audio-described. In doing so, the following criteria must be taken into account:

- a) The works must contain “message spaces” that make it possible to introduce the audio-described messages at essential moments in order to be able to follow the plot.
- b) Upon creating the audio description, one must avoid causing the visually impaired listener to become tired due to saturation of information or anxiety due to a lack thereof.
- c) The audio description must be made in the same language in which the sound-based information of the work is presented (See Section 3.2.2 m).

### **3.2.2 Drafting the script**

- a) The audio describer must consult the documentation referring to the environment and theme of the work that is being described, in such a way that the use of the proper vocabulary is guaranteed.
- b) The audio description script is made up of units, known as “information bubbles or descriptive units,” which must be located inside of the “message spaces.”
- c) The script must first of all take into account the plot of the dramatic action and, secondly, the settings and visual information contained in the image.
- d) The information must be appropriate for the type of work and the needs of the audience which it addresses (for example, children, youths or adult audiences).
- e) The style of writing in the script must be fluent, simple, with directly constructed phrases that constitute a document that makes sense on its own, avoiding cacophonies, redundancies and poor basic language resources.
- f) The appropriate specific terminology must be used for each work that is described. For the drafting of audio description scripts in Spanish, the grammatical rules established by the Spanish Royal Academy of the Language must be followed. For audio descriptions in all other official languages of Spain, the equivalent criteria established by the corresponding institutions must be applied.
- g) Specific adjectives must be used, avoiding those of an imprecise meaning.
- h) The time-space rule must be applied, consisting of clarifying the “when,” “where,” “who,” “what” and “how” of each situation which is audio-described.

- i) The information provided by the image must be respected, neither censoring nor cutting out any supposed excesses or complementing any supposed deficiencies.
- j) One must avoid describing what can be easily inferred or deduced from the work.
- k) Events in the plot must not be revealed or told beforehand, nor must situations of dramatic tension, suspense or mystery be disturbed.
- l) Conveying any subjective point of view must be avoided.
- m) The script must include information provided by occasional subtitles, signs, notices and credits, with a summary of those which are too lengthy, when the message space is too short to allow the literal audio description thereof.

**3.2.3 Proofreading and correcting the script:** Every audio description script must be proofread, pointing out the corrections necessary to adapt it to the principles stated in Section 3.2.2. These corrections must be made by a person other than the describer and are to be included in the final script.

#### **3.2.4 Narration**

- a) The narration must be produced in the presence of the image which it describes.
- b) The narrator must be selected according to the type of voices (male or female, adult or child) and the proper tone for each work, with the attempt made to ensure that the voices are clear to the listener.

**Note 1:** For children's works, it is recommended that the narrator use the proper intonation for children, which can be somewhat more expressive.

**Note 2:** For works with a predominance of female performers, it is recommended to use a male voice, and vice versa.

- c) The narrations must be neutral and the diction correct (proper intonation, pace and vocalization), and emotional intonation must be avoided.

**3.2.5 Editing in the selected medium.** In the mix, the volumes, equalization and environmental effects of the audio description track must be balanced with the Original Soundtrack, at all times adapting the sound qualities to the acoustic conditions of the described audiovisual.

**3.2.6 Reviewing the final product.** Once the recording on the selected medium has been completed in each case, it must be

verified that the audio-described product is compliant with the quality requirements established in this UNE standard.

## **4 Live Theatrical Audio Description**

In addition to meeting the applicable requirements, specified in Section 3.2 of this UNE standard, the production of audio description scripts for live theatrical performances must be compliant with the following requirements.

### **4.1 Prior analysis of the work**

A prior viewing of the theatrical performance must be carried out in order to take into account its specific properties.

### **4.2 Drafting the script**

The script writer / theatre describer must be familiarized with the basic theatrical nomenclature that makes it possible to properly name the events on stage.

### **4.3 Narration**

a) The script narration must always be read from a soundproofed cabin that makes it possible to see and listen to everything happening on the stage space simultaneously.

b) The narrator must be able to see the work, whether directly from the cabin or through monitors.

### **4.4 Receiving the information**

a) The narration must reach the user clearly, without being mixed with other sounds originating from the stage or the cabin itself.

b) Viewers with visual impairment must be provided with a mono-aural earpiece that allows them to receive the audio description and does not make it difficult for them to hear the direct sound from the stage.

c) Before beginning the theatrical performance, the program reading must be read, in addition to a description of the stage space (setting, elements on stage, ambient lighting, etc.) and the wardrobe.

It is also advisable to make a copy of the program available to user with visual impairment in the Braille system or in macro-characters.

## **5 Adapted Audio Guides**

In addition to complying with the applicable requirements specified in Section 3.2 of this UNE standard, the production of audio description guides for the adapted audio guides must be compliant with the following requirements:

### **5.1 Prior analysis of objects or situations**

The persons responsible for or managers of each cultural, artistic or natural space must choose the ideal objects or situations for being described. This selection shall be determined by the cultural or tactile relevance thereof.

### **5.2 Drafting the documentation**

The persons responsible for or managers of each cultural, artistic or natural space must provide the describer with the documentation regarding the selected space and objects to be audio-described. This documentation, written by expert personnel, shall constitute the basis of the information contained in the audio guide.

### **5.3 Information to be included in an audio guide**

An audio guide must contain the following sound-based information:

- a) Instructions on handling the electronic information device.
- b) Information regarding safety in the premises (emergency exits), warning about locations or situations which may constitute a physical risk.
- c) Description of the space, including:
  - Location of the entrance.
  - Location of the exit.
  - Route for movement throughout the entire space which can be visited.
  - Location of useful services, such as bathrooms, cafés, shops.
  - Location of accessible materials.
  - Location of layout maps and other information published in relief or touch-significant.
- d) Description of the objects or environment, including:
  - Location of captions with the information therein.
  - Location of each room within the ensemble of which they form part.
  - Use of not exclusively visual concepts, with an emphasis on the features which have other senses as a channel for perception.

### **5.4 Description of objects or settings**

- a) The description of each object or setting must contain the proper terminology, with an emphasis on the most significant aspects.
- b) When touch-based access is possible, the audio guide must direct exploration in a simple and organized manner so that the person with visual impairment can understand the most significant aspects of the object.
- c) When touch-based access is not possible, as occurs, for instance, with pictorial works, the description must focus on the

most significant information for understanding the work, expressly avoiding any personal interpretations.

### **5.5 Receiving the information**

Users with visual impairment must preferentially be provided with an individual receiver that must be portable, light and easy-to-use, and it must leave their hands free so as to allow touch-based exploration.

## **Annexe 2: WHEN PICTURES BECOME WORDS (German AD guidelines)**

[Translated into English from Deutsch]

Using audio description to make audio described films by Elmar Dosch and Bernd Benecke

Third, revised and amended edition

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About the authors:

Elmar Dosch was born in March 1961 in Hatzenbühl (Southern Palatinate). In 1983 he qualified as a management assistant in data processing in Heidelberg and since mid-1986 has been working at BIT, the text service centre for the Bavarian Association for Blind and Partially Sighted People<sup>2</sup> in Munich. The glaucoma from which he suffered from birth led to blindness in 1980. Along with literature, cinema is his great passion. Elmar Dosch has been able to accumulate a wealth of varied experience over the past fifteen years, working on the description of 24 films as well as the post-production and studio direction of a good 100 films. He has been wholly responsible for overseeing some projects, from obtaining the rights to designing the video/ DVD cover. Elmar Dosch has been in charge of audio described (AD) films at the BBSB since 1989. Bernd Benecke, born on 14.4.63., trained to be a teacher and then worked as an editor for an independent radio station; since 1993, he has been working at the BR. In 1989, he made the first AD film in Germany and while doing civilian service<sup>3</sup> with the BBSB, he founded a film magazine for blind people. Bernd Benecke has collaborated on 20 film descriptions and has even overseen the post-production and studio direction of around 100 films. In addition, he has worked as a narrator at several live film screenings as well as voicing around 40 studio productions. Since

March 1997 he has been the first and so far the only editor of this kind to be responsible for AD film activities at the BR.

1 Translator's note: the Bayerischer Rundfunk or BR. Hereafter, it will be referred to as the BR.

2 Translator's note: the Bayerischer Blinden- und Sehbehindertenbund e.V. or BBSB. The e.V. denotes its status as a voluntary action group. Hereafter, it will be referred to as the BBSB.

3 Translator's note: in Germany, civilian or community service is the alternative to compulsory military service for young men.

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From Bavarian law on the equality, integration and participation of people with disabilities:

#### Art. 1

...it is the aim of this law to protect the lives and dignity of people with disabilities, to prevent and eliminate discrimination against them, as well as to ensure that people with disabilities participate equally in life in society, to promote their integration and to enable them to determine their own lifestyle.

#### Art. 14

##### Media without barriers

The Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation and the Bavarian Federal Centre for new Media (Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien) are expected to... heed the aims set out in Art. 1 when making plans and taking measures. Consequently, television programmes in particular must be provided with subtitles and descriptions of images for people who are blind from birth, have lost their sight or are partially sighted.

# **I. Audio Description – The Key to Visual Media**

## **By Elmar Dosch**

### **1. Blind or partially sighted people and visual media**

About 155,000 blind and 500,000 partially sighted people live in Germany. Just like people with sight, they play sport, go on holiday and educational trips or visit museums, concerts and exhibitions. They too want to make use of the diverse cultural opportunities offered by our society, depending on their personal interests.

Where education, entertainment and information are concerned, blind and partially sighted people make use not only of cultural activities that are specific to people with visual disabilities and programmes provided by the various radio stations, but also, to a great extent, visual media such as television, video, cinema or theatre. Television is the second most important source of information for blind and partially sighted people, after radio.

However, full use of these media is often compromised by the fact that information is lost which is vital to the understanding of a subject or the progression of a plot. This is because feature films, reports, documentaries and television dramas are overwhelmingly biased towards the visual medium. The spoken word often plays only a very inferior role or is only understandable in conjunction with the images.

### **2. New technique from the USA**

In order to minimise this shortcoming as much as possible, audio description was developed in the USA. Film sequences that are purely visual are explained by a short, spoken script during pauses in the original dialogue.

In the mid-1970s, Gregory Frazier was already developing his theory on how visual media could be made accessible to blind and partially sighted people. In the 1980s, together with August Coppola of the San Francisco State University School of Creative Arts, he refined his theory and researched various areas of application. In Europe, the technique had its first public presentation at the Cannes Film Festival in 1989.

### **3. A technology catches on**

By now in the USA, many regional television channels run by the publicly funded Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the national provider Turner Classic Movies regularly broadcast programmes that have been adapted to cater for the requirements of blind and partially sighted people. The Boston-based Descriptive Video Service provides visually impaired Americans with video films and DVDs.

In Europe too, great progress has been made in this field. In Great Britain, over 70 theatres offer performances with audio description. All television broadcasters are obliged to provide 10 per cent of their scheduled programmes with audio descriptions by 2013.

Also, there is a considerable choice of described videos and DVDs in Great Britain. Furthermore, many cinemas regularly include the latest Hollywood hits with audio description (delivered through a headset) in their programme. In many large towns in France, a mobile system enables specially described films to be screened at cinemas. Various theatres are equipped with the necessary technology to provide an audio description of performances. Arte4 has been broadcasting AD films on television since 2000, including in France.

### **4. Development in Germany**

1989 saw the first efforts in Germany to establish this new technique. Encouraged by reports about the presentation at the Cannes Film Festival, Andrea Hartwig, Bernd Benecke, Robert Müller, along with myself as somebody affected by blindness, founded the Munich Group of Audio Describers for Films (Münchner Filmbeschreibergruppe).

With financial backing from the film distribution companies Columbia TriStar and 20th Century Fox, we worked on AD versions of the American comedies *See no Evil, hear no Evil* (December 1989) and *Look who's talking* (May 1990), as well as the English psychotriller *Afraid of the Dark* (March 1992). They were shown in special screenings to a very interested audience. Of course, at first we had to gain experience in how to implement these projects, both in terms of creating the descriptive texts and their technical execution.

At first, it did not prove very feasible to employ radio presenters who were unfamiliar with audio description as narrators. They had to be trained and to become conversant with an unfamiliar technology within a very short space of time (see also chapter IV point 6). It is only possible to transmit the spoken script over the cinema's loudspeakers in special screenings for blind and partially sighted people; otherwise the audio disturbs sighted cinema-goers. Even so, the alternative – conveying the description over an infra-red headset – also has pitfalls. When films have a very dynamic soundtrack, the volume of the description has to be constantly adjusted.

Photo [page 8]

The beginnings: (from left) Robert Müller, Elmar Dosch and Bernd Benecke on a trip to the cinema together

## **5. Searching for partners**

In 1993, with the organisational and financial backing of the BBSB, we were able to develop two new media at once for audio description, namely television and video. Working with the Munich Film Festival, we showed the first screening of an AD film at a German festival (July 1993). At the same time, the ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen - Second German TV Channel) television drama called *Unholy Love* (Eine unheilige Liebe) was also the first AD film to be shown on television (11th October 1993). Likewise, we were able to show the first described video film, the American comedy *Tootsie*, in October. Television broadcasts use two-channel technology. Viewers can pick up the film's normal soundtrack on channel 1. Channel 2 transmits the normal soundtrack with an additional image description. The ability to use an existing technology for broadcasting described films, without having to first invest a lot of time and money into the development of a new system, was a real stroke of luck for audio description. Unfortunately, since films in stereo do not use the second channel exclusively for AD versions, only those films recorded in mono or else stereo productions that have been adapted to mono can be considered - and broadcasters are very reluctant to do the latter. The widespread introduction of digital television should solve this problem, even if there are still some problems with two-channel audio in the current initial phases of digital television. However, in

principle, digital television provides as many stereo soundtracks as are desired.

Those three, completely diverse projects document very clearly what an important year 1993 was for the continued development of audio description. The next jobs involved two more ZDF television dramas, ...then I'll just leave (...dann hau' ich eben ab - April 1995) and Free Fall (Freier Fall - February 1997), as well as the PRO7 (private TV channel) crime thriller The sole Witness (Die einzige Zeugin - October 1995). By working with PRO7 we were able to make the first private television broadcaster aware of the interests of blind and partially sighted viewers.

\*\*\* Translator's note: arte is a Franco-German TV network that describes itself as a European culture channel.

## **6. Practice makes perfect**

Alongside adapting to technological changes, it became increasingly important to achieve a qualitative improvement in the film descriptions. It had been shown previously that a considerable time commitment was needed to work on a script with the required degree of meticulousness. On average, a 90-minute feature film took roughly 45 hours to adapt, although when estimating how much time is required, the level of difficulty of a film is of far more consequence than its length.

In terms of the content, we had to deal with various difficulties.

Here are some examples:

- Very turbulent action scenes such as car chases, fights or shoot-outs, in which high volume and speed make description difficult.
- Several storylines, with frequent switching from one to another.
- Exciting film sequences in which additional description must not kill the suspense.
- Erotic or love scenes, which require a particularly sensitive description.
- Abrupt changes of scene that barely allow time for a vital explanation.
- Situation comedy – this is hard to describe.

'Practice makes perfect' is the bottom line for all of these projects. Only somebody who works regularly on adapting the most diverse film genres will gradually acquire the necessary routine when

analysing a film, a feel for recognising important key scenes and an eye for which additional information is necessary.

## **7. Fifteen years of AD films in Germany...and no end in sight**

The idea of describing films did not catch on easily in Germany. The reason for this was that in the beginning it did not have any prominent proponents among the blind fraternity. Even its Associations had to be convinced at first. This meant that the early years involved a great deal of personal commitment. Stamina was also required in order to bridge the months of gaps between individual, small projects. The reward for all of this was several, wonderful successes, such as at the Munich Film Festival in 1993 and the cinema tour with PRO7 in 1995 or the launch of film description at the BR and arte in 1997.

There have also been many changes in the world of blind and partially sighted people. The establishment of audio description has been supported in many ways by the BBSB since 1993 and by the German Association for Blind and Partially Sighted People<sup>5</sup> since 1995.

As well as providing financial backing for several film descriptions, this support led to important changes in direction on a national level.

From 1997 to 2000, the DBSV's working party, AD Film (Hörfilm), initiated many varied activities - for example:

- The loan of described video films from the talking book library in Berlin. In the meantime, the talking book library in Munich has joined the scheme.
- The creation of a 3-year AD Film Project (Projekt Hörfilm), from which the German Audio Described Film Company<sup>6</sup> emerged in 2001. It was set up to co-ordinate the various activities in this sector and deal with new markets but now acts principally as a its own producer of AD films.
- Implementation of weekend seminars to train film describers.
- Regular distribution of current television schedules.

A survey conducted by the BBSB from mid-February to mid-April in 1996 demonstrates that an increasing number of blind and partially sighted people are interested in AD films. Around 1,200 members aged between 20 and 60 responded at the time to the question,

‘Should television become more accessible to blind and partially sighted people?’ Almost 2/3rd of them indicated ‘blind’ and 1/3rd indicated ‘partially sighted’ when they were asked to evaluate their level of sight.

In 97.3% of the households polled, a television set was regarded as basic hardware. 81.1% of respondents regularly sit in front of the screen. The three most popular types of programme are: the news (20.3%), television dramas (16.5%) and documentaries (13.5%). 89.5% of those asked would like more audio description in these categories and 62.8% were also prepared to make a certain financial contribution for this special service. The detailed results of this survey can be found in the appendix. The statistics are expected to be updated in the near future with a new survey, to reflect current opinion. In addition, the BR possesses numerous records of viewers’ reactions, which confirm very strikingly that the broadcaster is on the right track in its commitment. Likewise, the appendix gives a selection of viewers’ reactions.

Since July 1997 when the BR began the regular transmission of AD films and January 1998 when the Franco-German cultural channel arte followed suit, the ZDF has also started to regularly include described films in its schedule since March 1999, unlike its previous sporadic efforts. These are produced by the German Audio Described Film

\*\*\*\*Translator’s note: the Deutscher Blinden- und Sehbehindertenverband e.V. or DBSV. The e.V. denotes its status as a voluntary action group. Hereafter, the association will be referred to as the DBSV.

\*\*\*\*Translator’s note: the Deutsche Hörfilm gGmbH. The gGmbH denotes its charitable status.

Company, as are those for the SWR (Südwestrundfunk – South West Broadcasting Corporation); the NDR (Nord Deutscher Rundfunk – North German Broadcasting Corporation) and the MDR (Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk – Central German Broadcasting Corporation), produce their AD films in-house, like the BR and arte. The WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk – West German Broadcasting Corporation) only once stood up to be counted as a member of the audio description family when it wanted to finance 8 episodes of Crime Scene (Tatort7). Moreover, repeats of AD films

are shown on all regional versions of the third channel and also on the ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland – Consortium of public-law Broadcasting Institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany). The latest broadcaster to offer AD films is the ORF (Österreichischer Rundfunk – Austrian Broadcasting Corporation) which has been commissioning the production by the BR of four films per year since 2004. The privately owned broadcasters in Germany have excluded themselves until now. Only SAT1 has financed AD film versions for DVD over the past years.

Bernd Benecke and I spent the first years of audio description (1989-1995) mostly describing films, narrating, organising etc. but from 1996 onwards, our work expanded: we co-ordinated activities on Bavarian television, advised other broadcasting corporations, trained new film describers and narrators and also worked on post-production and studio direction. Much has been achieved since 1989. However, faced with the high number of television channels and films that are aired, it soon becomes clear that we still have a lot of work to do. This applies not least to the cinema and DVD sectors in Germany which still receive little attention.

## **II. Film description in practice**

By Elmar Dosch

The best procedure for producing AD descriptions which, in our opinion, has stood the test of time, is briefly outlined below:

### **1. Required tools of the trade**

A television set, a video recorder, a video cassette of the film to be described and a computer on which the script is written.

This is the technical equipment that a describer team need in order to start work. Recently, DVDs and accordingly a DVD player have been increasingly used, as a DVD offers considerably better picture quality; moreover, one can zoom in on the image in order to perceive details more clearly.

\*\*\*\*Translator's note: Tatort is a long-running German/Austrian (formerly also Swiss) crime television series, with each of the regional channels forming the ARD (German) and ORF (Austrian) producing its own episodes.

## **2. Required staff**

The best number of people in a describer team is three: a blind person who clarifies which additional information is required and two sighted people who together describe all aspects of the film to the blind person. In doing this, they need to supplement and check each other's comments, ask each other to be more specific and objectivise (four eyes see more than two). Apart from that, film description is not magic but instead a very creative activity, for which it is equally important to have good powers of observation as the ability to express observed information precisely and succinctly in words. A love of detail, a team spirit and a certain understanding of film as a medium are good pre-requisites for good results.

## **3. First impressions**

First of all, the team watch the film in question the whole way through. Afterwards, they analyse it together to ensure that everybody has the same knowledge base. The acquired facts (film in black and white or colour, number of flashbacks, slow-motion sequences, dream sequences etc.) are supplemented by a register of names, jobs and functions of the characters and their relation to one another. It is also helpful to have an overview of the most important locations and guidelines on specialised knowledge for some scenes (terminology, e.g. for mountaineering equipment or work clothing, etc.). By doing this now, one allows sufficient time for research.

## **4. Creating a draft script**

The team break down the film into short segments. If required, they formulate a short description that is slotted into the dialogue pause. Voice tests are highly recommended at this stage.

Generally, the very beginning of a film is particularly difficult, as a lot of different information has to be fitted in.

One scene after another is analysed in this way and if necessary provided with an explanation. It is also important to make an exact note of when the explanation must begin, so as not to clash with the next dialogue. To avoid this, sections of dialogue or changes of scene can be used as orientation points. It is important to indicate the time code, which is a counter superimposed on the image.

The following extract from the script for Chicken Run demonstrates what such a film description looks like.

10:30:38

“Let’s flap” (talk over the rest)

The chickens are in a queue. One hen flaps her arms and sprints up a ramp.

10:30:48

“come to her senses” (leave time for a little screaming)

The chicken plops down next to the rats...

10:30:50

(leave time to sit up)

...and falls over.

10:30:58

(leave time for Babs to squawk)

Babs lands with a crash and carries on knitting.

10:31:04

“obviously” (talk over the scream)

A springboard.

10:31:13

“Alright”

Mac on a conveyor belt.

10:31:15

(leave time for Mac to scream, talk over the rest)

She falls, is pulled backwards and scrapes along the ground. One after another, the chickens jump onto a hot water bottle and whirl through the air.

10:31:26

“Careful of those eggs” (talk over the rest)

Bunty runs with a hen on her shoulders...and gives her a push.

10:31:31

“ow” (leave time to land, talk over the rest)

The hen is stuck in a watering can. Mac jumps out of Bunty’s hands and bangs her head.

10:31:37

“over easy”

A rope is wound around a hen.

10:31:40

“definitely scrambled” (talk over the rest)

A second chicken pulls on the rope and the revolving hen briefly lifts off the ground. Then she falls, boring herself into the ground. The raw version of the script is finished once the whole film has been worked through in this way. Now the fine tuning begins.

## **5. Creating a fine-tuned manuscript**

The script is independently proofread by the participating describers. They check whether all essential explanations are in place, whether these explanations fit into the dialogue pauses, whether the names of the main characters have been provided in a clear and timely manner, whether it was possible to find a time slot in which to give a personal description of the characters, whether the plot was described clearly, whether formal errors (wrong name) or errors in logic (plot has been interpreted) have crept in. The text should be consistent with itself and should also reflect the film's atmosphere. The team discuss any questions, inaccuracies or weak points which arise from this process and, where applicable, they adapt the script. As a kind of 'final inspection', they watch the whole film together once more, while one member of the team adds a live commentary. Only at this point is the teamwork over.

## **6. Voice tests and studio preparation**

The text is now edited once more by the editorial team (in other words, e.g. the broadcaster); BR also involve a blind colleague at this stage. The finished script goes to the describer or narrator. He or she adds voice signals that indicate when to pause and speak more quickly or slowly and places a special mark next to sections of script for which, exceptionally, it is necessary to speak over the film's dialogue or allow important audio to be heard. The speaker then goes through several dry runs to practise the script in hand; this applies particularly if the script is going to be voiced live in the cinema or theatre. With a sound recording made in the studio for a television programme, small errors can of course be corrected at any time. To ensure that the description is articulated clearly and correctly, that additional script is fitted into the original film audio with precision and that a new soundtrack is mixed, all requires very concentrated work. A good working relationship with the technician involved is therefore very important. It saves time later if he has his own copy of the script, on which he can flag difficult passages.

# **III. The technical aspects of audio described films**

By Herbert Glaser, sound editor (sound designer) at the BR

When I was asked in 1997 whether I would like to collaborate on 'television for blind people', as it was called, I didn't know what to think about it at first. Of course, I knew the programme Seeing, not hearing for deaf people but 'television for blind people' seemed to me to be a contradiction in terms. The term 'audio description' meant nothing to me at first, either. It was only when the editor responsible at the BR, Bernd Benecke, explained to me that an additional description for blind and partially sighted people was recorded onto the second track of a film soundtrack, that it became clear to me what this was all about. I myself have been employed on a permanent contract as a sound technician with BR for about 20 years. The job I do there today bears almost no relation to what I did back then.

For a start, in former days one had to make copies of the work, cut the audio tapes (mechanically, by hand) and assist the sound editor with the audio mix. Rapid changes in technology over recent years have meant that these procedures are hardly carried out any more, in this form. About 15 years ago, I started getting into the field of 'audio consultancy', as it is known. This involved finding suitable sound effects in the very extensive BR sound archive (over 600 CDs with sounds, hundreds of tapes of sound effects), to meet the requirements of the film and to tie in with the director's or editor's ideas. These sound effects were then cut by the cutting editor in the cutting room, laid out and prepared for the audio mix.

The whole final mix (original sounds, archive sounds, synchronised sound from the mixing desk, music, speech) took place, therefore, in the (image) cutting room. This division of labour has completely changed since 1995. With the introduction of digital audio systems, many tasks were transferred to the audio mixing suite. Here, you receive the ready-cut film with the original audio and you are then responsible for all audio that is still missing, including mixing it. Of course, this means that you have more responsibilities but on the other hand, it introduces far more opportunities for creative design. Thus, a completely new job description evolved – the 'sound editor'.

As a rule, at BR voice recordings and sound mixes are made exclusively in one of our seven audio mixing suites and are produced only by sound editors. However, as these audio suites are generally booked up over a long period of time, we are expected to work on audio descriptions in a track-laying room.

Normally, all the audio for feature films and expensive documentaries is added in this room and the final audio mix is prepared with the help of a digital, computerised work station (we use ProTools). We were therefore breaking ground, not only in terms of the content but also from a technical/spatial point of view.

The raw material for creating an audio description consists of a finished film on a digital audio tape (DAT); first of all, I digitise this onto a hard drive. Both the audio and the video are digitised. If the film was originally produced in stereo, I mix both sound tracks onto a single track. This is necessary because only two channels can be transmitted at once and of course we need the second channel for the description. Unfortunately, by doing this we lose the stereo channels and also any Dolby Surround mix. We will only be able to enjoy audio description on multi-channel sound when, at some point in the future, it becomes possible to broadcast several channels using digital technology.

The next step is to record the script. This is also recorded straight onto a hard drive. I can interrupt the film at any point during this process, wherever I want, and then pick it up again, until the describer's script has been perfectly articulated. Next it is lined up with the film's soundtrack so that, where possible, it lies in the dialogue pauses. To achieve this, I have several options: I can cut the text, move it and also allow sections of it to run more quickly or slowly – without thereby changing the tone pitch (this is only possible using digital technology on the computer as it enables the sounds to be processed as data). Finally, I mix the film soundtrack with the description on track 2 of the digital audio tape; the original film soundtrack without the description stays on track 1. The viewer at home can choose between the two tracks if his television or video recorder has the necessary technology. The most important aspect of mixing is to make sure that the description is audible. For this reason, in the places where there is an additional script, I have to make the film audio as quiet as possible, so that it does not disturb the listener. This is how we have adapted a whole number of feature films and a thirteen-part series over the past years, together with Bernd Benecke of the BR and Elmar Dosch of the BBSB - and thus made them accessible to a new circle of viewers or listeners.

## **IV. Audio description – the art of describing a film**

By Bernd Benecke

If we are to set out below something like a set of rules for audio description, we have to be clear about one thing:

Every film that we want to describe is something new and unique: a fresh challenge to which the experiences we have gained from previous descriptions only apply in a limited way. Therefore, the following rules that we, the Munich Group of Audio Describers for Films, have evolved after fifteen years' experience of audio description do not pretend to be more than a crude framework; one can only judge the success of a description once it is completed.

The main rule of AUDIO DESCRIPTION, its fundamental idea, so to speak, sounds simple at first: The description should take place in the original dialogue pauses!

This means that it is essential that the spoken words in the film are audible, while the descriptions take a back seat.

Therefore, when working on the script, one should continually check whether the wording, which may have taken considerable effort to prepare, really fits into the dialogue pauses and does not cut off either the end of the previous sentence or the beginning of the sentence that follows. Compromises (for instance: 'This description has turned out so well that we can just run over into the first half-sentence') are not allowed. Ultimately, they just lead to the listener's inability to follow the dialogue properly. In cases of doubt, one has to look for a shorter wording that fits into the pause.

Strictly speaking, a description should really only follow when the film is completely silent, so when there is no dialogue or noise or music. However, this hardly ever happens and therefore one has to make a decision to speak over music and also some noises. In doing this, one has to continually question whether the precise place in which one wants to talk over the audio fulfils an important function in terms of the mood and atmosphere and thus whether it should remain undisturbed, at least sometimes. Music and sounds are also part of the language of a film!

Usually it is possible to comply with this rule when working on feature films and television dramas. On the other hand, films that are very rich in dialogue, especially television series, lead to constraints. It is often impossible in these circumstances to limit the essential information to the dialogue pauses - these frequently being few and then often short - particularly when more detailed descriptions of the characters need to be inserted as well.

In situations like these, we have decided to select sections of dialogue that are not completely essential and to talk over them with our description. Naturally, one must always proceed with caution when doing this and with considerable respect for the film. Also, only television broadcasts allow this to be done without encountering technical difficulties, as of course a completely new mix of film soundtrack and audio description is being made.

Cross-talking is not possible during a live performance!

- What needs to be described?

The answer seems quite simple at first: Everything there is to see. This phrase expresses not only a huge challenge ('everything'), but also - and above all - an important limitation - 'there is to see'. This is the self-imposed task of audio description: to translate into words the optical presentation of images on the screen, the stage or on television for the blind person. In practical terms for the describer, this means: not cutting short events by summarising (not, 'He is beaten up' but instead, for example, 'The masked man punches him in the face, pushes him to the ground and kicks him in the stomach') and not pre-empting events or explanations that appear later by interpreting them (not, 'His stomach ulcer is hurting again' but instead, more precisely, 'He presses his hand to his stomach, his face is distorted with pain').

The temptation to anticipate things, (e.g. that it is the murderer who is standing behind the door, that the policeman is a crook) may often be great, as there might be a lot of room for this information now but only a little room later. But this contradicts the intention of audio description which is to convey a film in the way it also presents itself to sighted people. However, an 'I-will-describe-only-what-I-can-see-right-now' rule that is too strictly enforced can also be a hindrance in some situations. One must be permitted to give a piece of information perhaps a few seconds before the

described event actually happens; indeed, it is often virtually impossible to do otherwise.

The classic example is: Somebody enters an empty room, the film is silent, and then this somebody is suddenly knocked to the ground, loud screams and noises. In this instance, the blow will be described shortly before it happens in the film – if given later, this information would be submerged beneath screaming and noise. Once the limitations of ‘describe only what you see’ have been taken to heart, one has to deal with the huge challenge of ‘describing everything’. This is usually constrained by the amount of time available, so it is necessary to prioritise in a certain way.

A ‘must’ in every description is to give information about the place or room in which the action is just taking place, about the people who appear or are acting out the scene and of course about the plot itself.

If there is still time available, one can allow oneself the luxury of describing clothes, furniture or colours. There may also be other small sub-plots that don’t necessarily advance the real story but help to capture the overall tone of the film.

Once one considers all of this to be satisfactorily completed, one should also think about the film as a whole. Have the dramatic composition, narrative arc, high points been adequately rendered?

- What should I say at the start?

With every description, the trial by fire comes at the start of a film. Even the sighted viewer decides at this point whether he or she can continue to follow the subsequent storyline. At the start, describers have to master the device of introducing all rooms and all characters while not neglecting the plot. One should not be discouraged – the first ten minutes of a film can and have, in extreme cases, taken up a whole day’s work. However, this rarely means that the entire film cannot be finished within a week or so after all.

When working on older films, it is frequently possible to insert all of this information by using the trick of speaking over part of the opening credits. However, in new films the introductory credits are often simply placed beneath the running storyline, thus making this impractical. Furthermore, action films in particular tend to start with a bang - in other words, before one can say a single syllable about

the characters, an explosion, car chase and shoot-out is already taking place. One has to rise to the challenge.

Fortunately, film dramaturgy dictates that after an initial bang, a calmer phase is introduced. This is when one can try to deliver additional information. At the start, the description must always give supplementary information about the characters who will be important as the film progresses. If possible, they should be described in more detail than others: age, hair colour, height, facial expression and gestures could be described. Here one is faced with a dilemma which is typical in audio description, for, as mentioned above, the audience should not be any better informed than a sighted viewer at this stage.

It is possible that the film has not yet defined the leading characters, that it starts with a sub-plot. Perhaps one will only know at the end of the film which character was important, but by then it is too late to say more about them. Thus, time and again one will say more about the important characters in the film right at the start and thereby, strictly speaking, cheat a little. However, considering that the blind person is meant to discover as much as possible about the leading characters in a film, this is acceptable, after all.

- When do I name the characters?

Introducing the names of the leading characters also presents a problem. A character should really only be named once he or she has had their name mentioned in the film. Until then, the person continues to be 'The man with the hat', 'The woman with the dog', etc. But time and again, there will be films which take a long time to name even the important characters. In this situation, the describer will want to intervene, not least in order to make his work easier for the rest of the film.

We too usually decide to name as early as possible important characters who are not named until late in the film. To do this, we have looked for a place (for example, in the first 10 minutes of the film) where it was also possible to give more information about the central character as well as their name (therefore, age, height, hair colour, etc. – see above).

Incidentally, the British have no qualms about this whatsoever. In Britain, characters are immediately furnished with names, even if more detailed information about them can only be given later.

- What does an audio described script look like?

Since all descriptions should fit into the dialogue pauses, which can often be very short, it is obvious that the sentences forming the descriptions are also as short as possible. However, they still need to be understandable, so the golden rule in this regard is: no more than one piece of information per sentence. Complicated constructions that appear to convey a lot of information just confuse the audience and are also harder to voice (not, 'Passing the exit, he stares at the red-haired sales assistant who is closing the cash till' but instead, 'He passes the exit. The sales assistant – she has short, red curls – is just closing the cash till. He stares at her.')

All of the words one chooses should be as impartial as possible: in other words, a dress is never beautiful or ugly but red or blue or whatever. It is up to the person watching the film or having it described to them to decide whether it is beautiful or ugly. Particular care must be taken when describing facial expressions, which of course always tell us something about the emotional state of a character. Here one risks flattening the film with descriptions that are too crude, (as in, for instance, 'He looks at her anxiously', 'Horried, he realises', 'He follows happily', 'Disappointed, he stands'). Instead of using unoriginal terms such as these, that then also become attached to the verb, one should take the time to describe the really important facial expressions (and only these!) in a more distinguishing way. This sits better and stops situations becoming interchangeable as a result of the describer continually falling back on the same expressions, (for example, instead of, 'He looks tensely at her', perhaps, 'He has squeezed his eyes shut, his cheeks are flushed, his lips pressed together'). In the interests of fairness, one should add that it is not always possible to avoid giving a short description of a facial expression, given the frequent brevity of the dialogue pauses.

- Which words do I use to describe?

Clearly the language or choice of vocabulary used in a description must be appropriate to the tone of the film. Written Standard German is usually of little help. Film signifies movement and real

life. Every script that is too formal or dry impedes this. However, the film adaptation of a book obviously requires a different register to an action comedy. Here, time and again, one has to tune one's ear to the intonation of the dialogue and the mood of the film, in order to find the right language for the descriptions as well. Technical terms that are specific to films should also be used very sparingly. Usually one cannot and should not assume that every viewer is familiar with these terms and their meaning. Moreover, a technical effect in a film is usually made visual by its impact, which then also has to be described. 'Scene change', for example, is a term that one would like to use time and again but this is not necessary. For, strictly speaking, one does not see a scene change: what one sees is a new room, a new scene which needs to be described – 'In the kitchen', 'Back on the street', etc. Terms such as 'fade out/fade to white' can also be ignored. Instead, it is better to say, 'The screen becomes dark', 'The screen becomes light'. An example of an established exception to the rule is the expression 'slow motion'. In our experience, blind and partially sighted people too have a good understanding of this concept; besides, this feature - unique to films - is difficult to re-word. We are also happy to say 'in black and white', as most people who were not blind from birth still remember this type of film well and clearly the term therefore evokes a certain atmosphere.

- How should the description be voiced?

This aspect of our work has changed noticeably in recent years. Even the most recent instruction states that in every case, it is preferable to employ describers from the authorial team rather than 'external narrators'. The background to this is that we kept coming to blows with professional narrators, particularly when we first started the work. They rewrote scripts and added interpretations – all of which seemed counterproductive to us. So we always used a describer from the team; there are more good reasons for this: The describer knows the film, knows the difficult and important sequences and can have the script written according to his individual speed of delivery, something which is very important in the creation of the description. One describer will manage to fit more into a particular dialogue pause, another will fit in less. Besides, the describer is familiar with the idea of an AD film, which is still rarely the case among actors and dubbers. Something else that seemed a problem to us was that some actors regarded their commentary as an active part of the film, a role in itself. However, for us the film was the real event: it was the

describer's task to supplement and fill in gaps, remain neutral, keep himself out of the film as a commentator and character.

We have revised this a little since working on films such as A Fish called Wanda, Captain Bluebear (Käpt'n Blaubär) or Chicken Run. In these cases, it was clear that a neutral describer would rob the film of its pace and zest. Therefore our describers underwent a marked transformation from being neutral commentators to active designers of the film.

At the same time, we were able to learn that one or other professional narrators dealt very well with AD films, leading to gratifying results: we produced Doctor Zhivago with Peer Augustinski (the German voice of Robin Williams), Bibi Blocksberg with Ulrich Noethen and Some like it hot with Udo Wachtveitl, the police inspector from Crime Scene (Tatort). Thus, the experiences expressed in this chapter show that rules should not be set in stone when working on AD films – one should remain open to other experiences.

- How detailed is good description?

Unfortunately, this is a question that can never be completely clarified, as everybody has their own standard. For the describer, there is often a very fine line between 'keeping the blind or partially sighted person guessing' and 'ruining the film with incessant babble'. The describer should bear in mind that first and foremost, the film should develop as freely as possible. Whenever possible, noises, music, sometimes even the silences in a film should be preserved. A description should only be given when absolutely necessary or when there really is something to say.

Even so, in our experience, blind and partially sighted people demanded ever more information and therefore our descriptions became increasingly detailed over the years. Our colleagues in Great Britain have even fewer qualms. They give a description wherever a gap in the script presents itself, sometimes even during a dialogue. They comment on every piece of music, every noise. In the USA, on the other hand, the current preference is said to be for briefer descriptions.

- Are some films unsuitable?

Since AD claims to make film, theatre and television accessible to blind and partially sighted people, it cannot begin by setting itself any limits. In this respect, it is quite clear that we cannot permit any

film to be deemed unsuitable! Of course, it is the case that some films are easier, others harder, to describe.

For example, action films are difficult but certainly not unsuitable. The more recent animated films that have quick cuts are also hard to describe (but possible), by contrast an older Disney film is easy. On the other hand, horror films and silent films will definitely require a completely different way of working; there is little experience in this field so far.

Furthermore, there are of course films that rely unduly on the visual medium for effect; even these can be described but in doing so, their actual impact and intention may well fall by the wayside. However, this is more likely to be the exception. In general, the process of audio description has continued to make film and television accessible to blind and partially sighted people, a fact demonstrated not only by our experiences but also those from the USA, Great Britain and France.

Nevertheless, this assumes that the scriptwriters, the describers, conduct their work on a professional basis. To do this, they must be trained and receive continual coaching. Moreover, they must regularly swap experiences. Audio description is a job that requires much artistic energy and cannot be rushed. Neither the describers nor producers nor viewers of AD films should underestimate this.

## **Appendix A**

### **Highlights in the history of audio described films in Germany**

Effective: July 2004.

1989

- Founding of the Munich Group of Audio Describers for Films (the Munich Describers) by Bernd Benecke, Elmar Dosch, Andrea Hartwig and Robert Müller.
- December 13: See no Evil, hear no Evil, first AD film in Germany; screening at the film museum in Munich (Columbia TriStar and the Munich Describers)

1990

- May 15: Look who's talking, screening at the Castle Cinema (Schlosslichtspiele) in Ansbach (Columbia TriStar and the Munich Describers)

1992

- March 8 & 24: Afraid of the Dark, screenings in Frankfurt and Marburg (20th Century Fox and the Munich Describers)
- In the summer, Andrea Hartwig produces two 30-minute video films for the series Normal for the Consortium for disabled People and the Media (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Behinderte und Medien) on the subject of audio description in the cinema or theatre, with the title Wait until dark.

### 1993

- July 2 & 3: Unholy Love, screenings as part of the Munich Film Festival (Munich Describers, Munich Film Festival and the BBSB, live narrator: Bernd Benecke) Director Michael Verhoeven is so delighted by this event that he ensures that the AD version is also broadcast on the ZDF.
- October 4: Tootsie, first AD film video in Germany (Munich Describers, Columbia Home Video and the BBSB)
- October 11: Unholy Love, first broadcast of a television drama with audio description on German television. With the help of two-channel technology, blind and partially sighted people pick up the acoustic image description.

### 1995

- ZDF shows the AD versions of television dramas ...then I'll just leave and Hotel Mama.
- October 9-11: The sole Witness, cinema tour and then video production (Munich Describers, PRO7, editor: Andrea Willson)
- Narrator: Bernd Benecke

### 1996

- Professional seminar in Munich on 'What next in audio description?' (Organisers: the DBSV, BBSB, Bernd Benecke and Elmar Dosch) Participants included Birgit Gabriel from arte and Holger Lösch from the BR.
- Mid-February to mid-March: The BBSB conducts a survey among some of its members on the question 'Should television become more accessible to blind and partially sighted people?' (See appendix)
- February 23 & 25: The other Wolanski (Der andere Wolanski), first television transmission by the broadcaster arte. (Arte and H. Meiser Saarbrücken)
- September 11: summit on the subject of audio description at the DBSV with representatives from the BBSB and the Munich Group of Audio Describers for Films. As a consequence, a

working party called AD Film is formed at the DBSV which is expected to do further work on this subject. From February 97 onwards, it meets two or three times per year.

1997

- March 4: Bernd Benecke starts work as editor for AD films at the BR. As the first broadcaster in Germany, the BR plans to broadcast AD films monthly and makes its own funds available (until then, the ZDF's AD films had been paid for by the DBSV).
- Seven years later, the BR produces 12-14 new AD films annually; with repeats and acquisitions, this adds up to one AD film on Bavarian television every one to two weeks.
- July 2: Back to Square One (Alles auf Anfang), first AD film on Bavarian television.
- October 9-12: first training seminar for film describers at ZFP in Hanover. Consultants: Dosch/Benecke
- Describer teams Munich 2 and Berlin 1 start work

1998

- April 1: the AD Film Project (Projekt Hörfilm) gets underway at the DBSV.
- April 16-19: second training seminar
- Four more teams start work.
- October/November: six old Schimanski 8 episodes of Crime Scene are produced by the WDR with the help of the BR and are broadcast on Channel 1 (Erstes Programm, ARD) as AD films. After that, the WDR only adapted two further episodes of Crime Scene but these were never broadcast.
- December 14: 'Seeing differently' event at the state chancellery for Rhineland- Palatinate in Mainz; as a consequence of a meeting of politicians, broadcasters and companies, the ZDF and SWR announce the production of their own AD films. Shortly after, the MDR also begins producing AD films.

1999

- February: the AD Film Project starts producing versions for the film festival in Berlin. Every year, two or three films are adapted for the cinema. The description is relayed through headsets; the film's soundtrack is played over the hall's loudspeakers. 8 Translator's note: part of the Crime Scene series and produced by the WDR in the 90s.
- June 5-6: Uncle Vanya at the Berlin Theatre (Berliner Schaubühne), first play with audio description to be shown in

Germany. There are plans for a described play - Cathy from Heilbronn (Das Kätchen von Heilbronn)<sup>9</sup> - to be shown in Kiel in October 2004.

- November: the BR is awarded the prize for integration by the BBSB for its commitment to audio description.
- December 6: first ARD conference on AD films in Munich with representatives from the BR, arte, NDR, MDR and SWR. Discussions about exchange of films, technical aspects and public relations.

2000

- January/February: the NDR also begins the production of AD films with help from the BR. Initially, six old NDR episodes of Crime Scene are shown on Channel 1 with audio description.
- March 31: second ARD audio description conference in Munich. The HR (Hessischer Rundfunk - Hessian Broadcasting Corporation) and the WDR as well as the AD Film Project are there, too.
- April 26-29: teletext conference held by the EBU in Turkey (EBU = the affiliation of state run broadcasters and those regulated by public law in Europe). Bernd Benecke (BR) for Germany and Birgit Gabriel (arte) for France present the AD film for the first time in an international arena.
- May 1: arte airs its first AD film in French: Marius and Jeannette (Marius et Jeannette).
- The AD Film Project produces the first AD versions for DVD (La Strada, The third Man, All about my Mother)
- December: foundation in Munich of Audio Described Film<sup>10</sup>, the professional association for German film describers. The aim is to establish the authors' work as a recognised profession, in accordance with quality criteria.

2001

- April: the ARD three-part series The Shop (Der Laden) is provided with an audio description in the first AD collaboration between arte, the BR and MDR.
- August 15: as a successor to the AD Film Project, the German Audio Described Film Company is set up. The sole shareholder is the DBSV.
- September 6-7: BR and arte meet the producers of audio description in Great Britain (the ITFC, IMS and BBC).

2002

- March 18: the first German prize for audio description in films is awarded by the DBSV to the ZDF and the BR. The broadcasters are distinguished for their pioneering work in the introduction of audio description.
- June 6: the BBSB opens the first cinema with audio description in Germany. Every month, an AD film (often a première) is shown on a large screen.
- June 13-14: conference on 'TV broadcasting for all' takes place in Seville, Spain. By order of the European Commission, delegates are expected to work out the essential requirements for giving deaf and blind people better access to the media. Arte, BR and the German Audio Described Film Company take part, among others.
- October 18: in Strasbourg, producers of AD films and describers from France, Great Britain and Germany meet for the first time under the direction of Audio Described Film.

2003

- August 25: Bibi Blocksberg is the BR's first DVD with audio description. Its special feature: the actor Ulrich Noethen voices the description from the subjective viewpoint of Bibi's father whom he plays in the film.
- December 16: for the first time the BR presents the AD version of a feature film just five days after its release in cinemas, namely My magical friend Sams (Sams in Gefahr). The film is shown in special screenings in Munich, Marburg, Hamburg and Würzburg, the description, which has been mixed in the studio, is relayed over the loudspeakers.

2004

- The ORF begins producing AD films with a minimum of four films per year. The films are produced on behalf of the ORF by the BR in Munich.
- Senator Film presents the feature film Peas at 5.30 (Erbsen auf halb 6) in several towns with audio description. Unlike My magical friend Sams, the description is transmitted over infra-red headsets and the film's soundtrack over the loudspeakers in the hall.

## Appendix B

The audio described film in the media

A small press review

From the beginning: Süddeutsche Zeitung, December 1989  
See no Evil, hear no Evil as enjoyable cinema for blind people

Successful start to pilot project yesterday

Claus Schneyder had already been to the cinema quite a few times. But the 13-year-old had never before enjoyed it as much as yesterday, when he went to the cinema at the town's museum. At last he understood exactly what the film – it was See no Evil, hear no Evil – was actually about. He could join in the laughter and feel the tension. Claus Schneyder is blind.

Blind people at the cinema – it seems like a paradox. But in Germany there are over 60,000 blind cinema fans. For this group of disabled people, the film distributor Columbia TriStar has now set up a pilot project costing 5,000 German Marks, which is meant to help improve the experience of blind people who want to watch films at the cinema. The idea is easily implemented: in addition to the film's dialogue, spoken descriptions were recorded onto a video cassette converted into a sound recorder, making the sequence of events in the film easier to follow, even without an image. With a small receiver, blind people can listen to the additional script through a headset. Elmar Dosch has worked with three colleagues from the BBSB to create the taped script. For years, regular trips to the cinema have been liberating him from the isolation felt by a person without sight, giving him an experience he can share with other fellow citizens. Elmar Dosch knows, therefore, what the new project comes down to: 'The descriptions must be brief, must not interrupt the film's dialogue and must indicate when there are sudden changes of scene.' If the blind version of See no Evil, hear no Evil is a success, the managing director of Columbia TriStar, Jürgen Schau, would like to 'adapt one film every month'. Schau says that, with a simplified system, the ultimate aim is to furnish every larger cinema with about ten seats for blind people that are directly connected to the explanatory cassette via headsets.

The production of this accompanying film cassette is now already, within a short space of time, the second step towards making blind people's experience at the cinema more enjoyable. Since September, the audio film magazine Preview has been publishing its editions on a monthly basis. Listeners to this magazine can hear film tips, reviews, interviews, dates and more from the world of film buffs. The magazine can be obtained in cassette form from BIT-Zentrum, Arnulfstr. 22, 80335 Munich, Germany.

Michael Sporer Live from the Munich Film Festival: Süddeutsche Zeitung, July 1993

Interpreter of images

At the cinema with a blind person: audio description at the Film Festival

It is quiet in the room, a clock ticks, the screen is black. From time to time, a few white specks flicker over the television screen. 'Is that the opening credits? Can you see anything yet?' Silence again, a clock tower comes into view. 'Ah, now it's starting'. How does he know? After all, Christian Seuß is blind. Now the second man in the room begins to speak. Bernd Benecke is his name.

Unholy Love – a film by Michael Verhoeven. Neustadt church tower in front of a blue evening sky.

Through the half-open sacristy door we can see two altar boys playing with an inflated rubber glove. Quote film: 'Stop that nonsense, you two.' Quote Benecke: 'The vergier helps the priest Georg Mittenzwey take off his tunic.' Quote film: 'Take off yer vestments.' Quote Benecke: 'The altar boys lay the inflated rubber glove on the table, take off their surplices, while in the background Georg the priest puts on a grey anorak.'

This is the dress rehearsal for a special kind of film première. The audio described version of the new film by Michael Verhoeven, Unholy Love, at the Film Festival. Audio description is described thus in a note by the BBSB: 'It is a piece of infra-red equipment. It is a headset. It is the re-working in a film of impressions that are purely visual into acoustic effects. It is a neutral voice that conveys these impressions live or over an independent soundtrack during the quiet sequences of a film that are intended for the eye.' One could also simply say: audio description is cinema for blind people. I beg your pardon? Cinema for blind people? Christian Seuß is familiar with this reaction by now: 'Most people don't twig that blind people also want to see the films everyone is currently talking about. After all, we want to join in the discussions too.' This is why Seuß, as chief executive of the BBSB, has taken it upon himself to finally bring into the public domain the subject of blind people and film, under the umbrella of the Film Festival. 'In England and America, they are far more advanced in this respect. There, all the important films are available - on video at least - in a version for

blind people.’ However, in Germany a general lack of interest prevailed on all sides, ‘despite it being perfectly achievable in technical terms.’ This makes it even more important that everything works in the demonstrations.

Bernd Benecke is going to describe the film live. One can listen to the blind version over a headset - after all, it is not the intention to disturb the normal spectators. Naturally, the performance is intended to integrate the blind audience, not set them even further apart. Everything that one would normally see has to be described by Bernd Benecke. He is a kind of interpreter except that he translates images rather than language. In England this job is already a proper profession known as a describer. Looking at Bernd Benecke’s notes, it becomes clear that the job cannot be done simply by following rules. The twelve sheets look chaotic. He has scribbled an S for himself next to particularly fast-moving sections of script. For days, he sat with Andrea Hartwig and Elmar

Dosch in front of the television; the first ten minutes took them nine hours. They watched the film over and over, scene by scene, and tried to insert their script without clashing with the film’s dialogue: ‘The difficult thing about this film is that I have to narrate a quarter of the total script at the beginning. There are quite a few jump cuts and one has to keep introducing new rooms and new characters. At the end we then have a ridiculous amount of time but of course I can’t start describing what the central characters look like an hour into the film.’

Christian Seuß imagines the priest to be young and sporty. ‘He could be blond and blueeyed. I know that these are stereotypes but sometimes I’m spot on.’ His pale blue eyes are wide open, his pupils dart from side to side. He has been completely blind for 14 years:

‘You can shine a headlight directly onto my face and I only know it’s there because it gets warmer.’ As a student he often went to the cinema with friends, who would then whisper into his ear. Today his wife does most of the interpreting for him. But sometimes he likes sitting in front of the television on his own: ‘Films with dialogue are OK and you can hear kisses and such like, but the worst are westerns. There’s loads of shooting, then someone yells. And? Who survived?’

Karin Steinberger

The BR initiates its schedule of audio described films: BWZ (Bunte Wochen Zeitung– Weekly Colour TV Guide) Nr. 35/97

### Seeing by hearing

Television for blind people sounds like a paradox at first. But the BR has recently been regularly airing films with 'acoustic subtitles'. Showdown in a western. Villain and sheriff in the final duel. There are two shots, a brief silence, finally the clip-clop of horses' hooves. Then the closing credits. While the closing music plays, blind people are left to guess whether good has triumphed. They have missed out on a crucial part of the storyline. Dr Thomas Nicolai of the DBSV knows about this. Nevertheless, he has ascertained that for most people who cannot see, television is the number one medium. 'Many people who don't become blind until they reach an advanced age are used to television', Nicolai says. While news and magazine programmes can often be understood just by listening, feature films and especially crime thrillers often only convey important information visually.

Now Bavarian television is the first broadcaster in Germany to give regular acoustic support to the approximate 650,000 people who are blind and partially sighted. Editor Bernd Benecke explains the process of 'audio description': 'During the scenes in which there is no dialogue, we offer additional descriptions of what is going on.' Two-channel sound makes it possible. The original audio runs on one soundtrack, the supplementary commentary runs on the other.

'The sheriff is unhurt and gets on his horse', is how the western might end. The additional information is given in a concise and unemotional manner. The main thing is not to cover up too many noises and music, otherwise too much talking kills the film. Benecke: 'The describer should not intervene in the action.'

In Munich, a team of three people, including a blind person, adapt one feature film per month. Elmar Dosch listens to the movie and says when he has problems following the plot. From this, the script for the second soundtrack develops...The ZDF was a clear pioneer in everything related to AD films for blind people. In 1993, *Unholy Love* was the first television drama to be aired with an audio description. Seven others followed but only sporadically. Ludwig Krecker, director of the central department for television drama, says: 'We want to provide between five and six films per year with acoustic subtitles. But the cost is relatively high, it must be said.'

Nevertheless, the DBSV picks up the lion's share of the cost – at least 15, 000 German Marks – of adapting each programme. From its fees, Bavarian television has allocated an annual budget of 100,000 German Marks to audio description. Apart from good old money matters, there is another reason why only a small number of films are adapted for blind people. Kreckler says, 'More and more films are produced in stereo straight off.' It is not so easy to trim the audio to fit onto one channel.

Until now, television for blind people has been the preserve of public broadcasting organisations. The private ones turn a blind eye to it. SAT-1 spokesperson Kristina Faller says, 'The target audience is too small.'

Björn Quäck  
Münchener "tz" of 18.12.2003:

Performances of audio described films with My magical friend Sams as an example It sounds like a joke at first: a cinema full of blind people. But just because someone cannot see anything does not mean that they are necessarily excluded from the play of light and shadow of the film medium. Eyes wide shut can also work on the cinema screen. However, although some of our blind and partially sighted fellow citizens are not afraid to attend conventional performances, in the hope that they will glean enough information through the soundtrack and from sighted companions; most would still like a little assistance. 'Audio description' are the magic words and anyone who has a television with multiple audio channels and likes late-night zapping will certainly have come across it before: these are versions in which a narrator uses the gaps in the dialogue to describe the most essential visual action.

However, until now only television has done this in Germany and blind people had to wait a few, long years to see films that had been suitably adapted. But now, for the first time, the BR has a hot-off-the-press production that blind people can experience just a few days after the conventional première - and at a regular cinema: the spanking new AD version of 'My magical friend Sams', which had its world première at the Atelier cinema in Munich.

'Film is a social medium, it's a current event, it's a conversational topic. And for blind people to experience new films in this way

means that they can have a say', explains Elmar Dosch, the person in charge of audio described films at the BBSB who collaborated on the new Sams soundtrack. Since this is all about participating more easily in the things we take for granted in society, it would make no sense to ask why blind people don't simply listen to the soundtrack, why they need to be shown an image at all. These versions have definitely been created with the intention of being watched and/or heard by a mixed audience.

As it is, the section of the Sams audience blessed with eyesight has to put up with a permanent, thick "Audio described version" in the middle of the picture as the film distributor is wary of pirate copies. But at some point, one can almost mentally block out the writing - or one closes one's eyes, even as a sighted person, and listens: the BR editor Bernd Benecke and his team have done a really skilful job in interweaving the additional aural information with the film rather than grafting it on. Even the timing of the jokes, which are often visual, still comes across. And even if it is still hard to say what mental pictures one would form if one had never seen the actors – short, fat Sams with his flame-red hair and his blue wetsuit – or if one only knew 'red' and 'blue' as words: the enthusiastic applause from the blind audience proved that the pictures were vivid, tangible and comprehensible.

My magical friend Sams is now going on a small tour around Germany – whether it will be possible to listen to it again at the cinema in Munich depends essentially on how vociferous demand is. However, as of recently, in principle blind and partially sighted people in this town will not need the Sams' magic freckles any more to make the dream of assisted cinema-going a reality. Bruno Borger, the director of the Atelier cinema, has introduced a regular AD film matinee since October, on the first Sunday of each month at 13.00.

Thomas Willmann

## **Appendix C**

Results of the survey: 'Should television become more accessible to blind and partially sighted people?'

1166 returned questionnaires, of which

- 777 blind (66.6%),
- 361 partially sighted (31.0%)

## Situation

- 97.3% of those polled own a television (in the home)
- 81.1% of those polled regularly watch television (if television set available)
- Favourite television programmes (one answer possible):
- 20.3% news programmes
- 16.5% television dramas
- 13.5% documentaries
- 13.1% television magazines
- 11.6% crime thrillers

## Television in the future:

- 89.5% of those polled would like additional descriptions of the images
- 93.6% of 20-29-year-olds polled would like additional descriptions of images
- 90.4% of 30-39-year-olds polled would like additional descriptions of images
- 91.4% of 40-49-year-olds polled would like additional descriptions of images
- 87.3% of 50-59-year-olds polled would like additional descriptions of images

## Image description wanted for the following television programmes: (several answers possible)

- 82.7% television dramas
- 59.5% crime thrillers
- 52.2% documentaries
- 38.4% sports
- 37.8% news programmes
- 36.0% westerns
- 30.8% for magazine programmes
- 18.6% for talk shows
- 92.0% of those polled would like the BBSB to champion the cause for more frequent broadcasts with description.
- 62.8% of those polled are prepared to pay an additional fee, (e.g. 15 German Marks per month).

## **Appendix D**

### Viewers' reactions to audio description

Michael Jörg on audio described films in general:

I became blind because of a retinal disease. When I was still able to see, I liked watching films on television. Now AD enables me to do this. I think it is great, the way that the dialogue pauses are used to describe actors, situations, plot lines as well as landscapes. Even my sighted partner enjoys these films because she can carry on doing her handicrafts and needlework without having to look up. You see, in films without audio description, she has to continually explain to me what is happening in the film. I would be delighted if these descriptions continued to be available and were even added to.

Dagmar Rath from Koblenz on 'Back to Square One':

I have been completely blind for about three-quarters of a year and therefore I am dependent on audio description. I can say that I was pleasantly surprised by the film Back to Square One. I hadn't seen it without audio description but I was won over by it. I found it funny and exciting and I really liked it.

Thomas Heimpold from Heilbronn on 'The long Good Friday':

Normally I don't find gangster movies that great but with audio description this film actually did win me over. With films like this, I really always have problems with the individual characters. Here, this was no longer a problem because the description referred to the characters by name. I had the overall impression that the film was actually predestined for audio description because of the long opening credits and the long passages of music throughout.

Bernd Fritsche on 'The Piano':

In my opinion, the film is an outstanding example of why audio description is necessary. This film would be absolutely impossible to understand without additional explanations. Also, I cannot imagine that somebody who happens to be with you would be able to convey the essential information anything like as well. I am delighted that I did not miss it!

Uwe Röder on 'The Piano':

The audio description really was a miniature masterpiece! It was possible to distinguish it very easily from the normal film soundtrack and dubbers – of course, by now we know the describers. It must have been a lot of work for the AD team.

Although you have to concentrate a bit harder when there are several people speaking, the film was certainly worth it.

Tomm.i@online.de on 'Goldfinger':

I watched the film with my wife and children and I must say that it was another enjoyable evening of television. My family have adjusted very well to audio described films and as a blind person, I got a lot out of the evening as well. I am always pleased when there is a film on with audio description as I became blind later in life and did miss our evenings in front of the television together.

Ulrike Jochheim on 'Goldfinger':

Now I know who Goldfinger is... To be able to follow such a long film effortlessly was sheer relaxation. Also, Mr Baumann had exactly the degree of suspense in his voice that I find agreeable. For me, it isn't good when the describers speak in a completely distanced way.

Regine Planer-Regis on Fate (Verhängnis):

I thought the AD (audio description) was fantastic. As I can still see a little, I compared the images with the descriptions, which I found incredibly faithful to the pictures, particularly in the erotic scenes. I like that. I imagine that it can't be very easy to find the right language for those kinds of scenes but it described exactly what you could see, no more, no less. If you only watch a film once, you miss a lot anyway and I have often noticed that if you have an AD with the film, you pick up far more than usual – and that can't always just be because of what you see.

Bianca Hess on 'The Pelican Brief':

At last I can watch a whole load of AD films over the holidays again. It's great!... And as always, the things that give me pleasure are the 'small details', the gestures that seem so insignificant, that express distance and closeness between people or how we communicate in a non-verbal way. Not important for the plot but tremendously important for the feel of a film and its characters.

Uwe Simon on 'The Horse Soldiers':

Last Saturday I had the pleasure of listening to The Horse Soldiers with John Wayne on Bavarian television. Joachim Höppner revelled in his top-notch, première role as narrator but the description team have also done an excellent job – that really needs to be said, as the describers seem to rarely receive any

praise, at least not in public. Udo Wachtveitl too was a first-class narrator in *Some like it hot* and he also counts among the best narrators along with Mr Höppner....These two actors and of course Bernd Benecke are the best describers of AD films, even if the rest aren't bad. But if I compare the two existing versions of *Dinner for One* made by the NDR and BR, I much prefer the way the BR version is voiced – his colleague at the NDR is far too serious for this story...

Director Caroline Link on *Beyond Silence (Jenseits der Stille)*: Naturally, interpretations do creep in involuntarily because the script that relates this film plot simply has to describe facial expressions of some kind. And in those moments, I always sat there and thought – it just isn't true at all, when he says that she looks at him in a sceptical way. That isn't scepticism – she's looking at him lovingly. Of course, he slightly interprets the things that a blind person can't see and every time, I thought to myself - I really must drop that, to make sure that every feeling is described correctly. The script was probably wonderful for blind people and was made professionally and was very good. But the described film I heard was different, in parts, to the way in which I would have described it.

## **Appendix E**

AD films – and how to pick them up on television...

An AD film runs on a two-channel soundtrack in which the normal film soundtrack can be heard on the left-hand channel while the mix of sound track plus additional audio description can be heard on the right-hand channel. One can choose between the two. Technical requirements: an analogue system requires a stereo television set or a stereo video recorder or a stereo satellite receiver; a digital system requires a decoder that can separate the two-channel soundtrack (see below).

How are programmes received at home?

1. Analogue television (which has always existed)

Via aerial: The television automatically chooses soundtrack 1, in other words the normal film soundtrack. To choose AD with a remote control or screen menu (unfortunately this varies according to manufacturer), set to soundtrack 2. Analogue television via an aerial will be completely closed down in Germany in the next few years!

Via cable: Should in theory work in the same way as via aerial but many stations are transmitted over satellite, therefore may have no audio description (only the BR, 3Sat and arte send audio description over satellite). Also, sometimes the local telecom company (or whoever operates the cable network) or the in-house installer 'forgets' to feed through the second audio channel, in which case you need to complain to them.

Via satellite: (only the BR, 3Sat and arte) Unfortunately, the receiver initially offers both tracks, in other words, film soundtrack left, AD film right. The desired soundtrack has to be selected on the receiver itself (which varies according to manufacturer – either with the mono button or by directly inputting frequency, e.g. 7.02 for normal film soundtrack and 7.20 for AD film version). Arte is the exception, in that the audio description is broadcast on a special frequency (7.56) that has to be set manually, rather than the usual second channel.

Recording with a stereo video recorder: The recorder records both tracks; to watch, choose the desired track using the audio selection button (every stereo recorder has one!).

## 2. Digital television (across the whole of Germany by 2010)

For now, the two-channel soundtrack only works in a limited way on digital television. This is the case regardless of how it is received, whether

- Digitally received via aerial (currently in Berlin, Bremen, Hanover, Cologne, soon in other regions as well). Or if you receive your programmes
- Digitally via satellite or
- Via an extra digital box for your cable connection (e.g. for Premiere).

Two-channel sound only works well with arte, as it has a second stereo channel for AD film versions that every decoder can recognise; the ZDF and 3Sat have recently set up a similar system. For the time being, the BR still broadcasts the two-channel soundtrack on the first stereo channel and you may be lucky or you may not. Depending on the make, the digital decoder can separate out the two-channel soundtrack - or alternatively it offers an unfeasible combination of the described and undescribed film versions which cannot be separated. To date, no broadcasters provide AD films digitally! (as of September 2004).

Recording on a video recorder: The recorder only records the soundtrack that has been set on the decoder, so on arte, only the version without a description or the AD version can be recorded: it is no longer possible to select one during play-back! With the BR and 3Sat, everything functions as before but only if the decoder recognises the two-channel soundtrack (see above). Otherwise you get a combination of both soundtracks on both tracks!

## **Appendix F:**

Contact addresses for AD films

Bavarian Association for Blind and Partially Sighted People

Bayerischer Blinden- und Sehbehindertenbund e.V.

In charge of AD films: Elmar Dosch

Arnulfstraße 22

80335 München

Tel: 089 - 55 9 88 239 | Fax: 089 - 55 9 88 334

E-mail: [hoerfilm@bbsb.org](mailto:hoerfilm@bbsb.org)

Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation

Bayerischer Rundfunk Fernsehen

Department for arts and languages

Audio described films

Bernd Benecke

80300 München

Tel: 089 - 3806 6027 | Fax: 089 - 3806 7636

E-mail: [hoerfilme@br-online.de](mailto:hoerfilme@br-online.de)

Web: [www.br-online.de/hoerfilme](http://www.br-online.de/hoerfilme)

German Audio Described Film Company

Deutsche Hörfilm gGmbH

Rungestraße 19

10179 Berlin

Tel: 030-23 55 73 40

Fax: 030-23 55 73 433

E-mail: [info@hoerfilm.de](mailto:info@hoerfilm.de)

Web: [www.hoerfilm.de](http://www.hoerfilm.de)

English production companies of AD films for TV and cinema:

ITFC

General Manager Chris Higgs

28 Concord Road, Acton, London W3 0TH, UK

Tel: 0044 - 020 8752 0352

Fax: 0044 - 020 8993 6393  
E-mail: [chiggs@irfc.com](mailto:chiggs@irfc.com)  
Web: [www.itfc.com](http://www.itfc.com)

#### IMS

Head of Audio-Description Veronika Hyks  
21 Soho Square, London W1V 5FD, UK  
Tel: 0044- 0171 440 5400  
Fax: 0044- 0171 440 5410  
E-mail: [ims.marketing@dial.pipex.com](mailto:ims.marketing@dial.pipex.com)

American Production Company of AD films:  
Descriptive Video Service  
Media Access Group at WGBH  
125 Western Avenue  
Boston, MA 02134, USA  
Tel: 01 - 617-300-3600  
Fax: 01 - 617-300-1020  
E-mail: [access@wgbh.org](mailto:access@wgbh.org)  
Web: [www.wgbh.org/dvs](http://www.wgbh.org/dvs)

When is- which film -on where with AD?

There are various ways to find out about when AD films are scheduled.

Video text

- page 397 on First Channel (ARD) and Bavarian television – page 775 ZDF
- page 384 arte

Video text pages for ARD and ZDF as well as Bavarian television are read aloud by a computerised voice response system through the BIT helpline on +49 89 55988 288.

Internet

The internet also publishes schedules:  
[www.br-online.de/hoerfilme](http://www.br-online.de/hoerfilme)  
[www.hoerfilm.de](http://www.hoerfilm.de)

Magazines

The Present (Die Gegenwart) – the monthly members' magazine of the DBSV – regularly publishes all providers' current schedules under the heading Forum for AD films. They can also be found in Braille TV (Braille-TV), which is the only TV guide for blind people.

In some 'normal' TV guides, AD films are also indicated with an appropriate logo (a small eye that has been crossed through).

#### Film loans

And even if you have still managed to miss a film, it may be possible to borrow the relevant video cassette from the talking book libraries in Berlin or

#### Munich:

Berlin Talking Book Library for Blind People  
Berliner Blinden-Hörbücherei  
Berliner Allee 193 -197  
13088 Berlin  
Tel: 030 - 826 31 11  
Fax: 030 - 923 74 100  
E-mail: [info@berliner-hoerbuecherei.de](mailto:info@berliner-hoerbuecherei.de)  
Web: [www.berliner-hoerbuecherei.de](http://www.berliner-hoerbuecherei.de)

Bavarian Talking Book Library for Blind People  
Bayerische Blindenhörbücherei e.V.  
Lothstr. 62  
80335 München  
Tel: 089 -121 5510  
Fax: 089 -121 55123  
Web: [www.bbsb.org/medien/Blindenhoerbuecherei.htm](http://www.bbsb.org/medien/Blindenhoerbuecherei.htm)

## **Annexe 3: The French Audio Description Charter**

Making culture accessible to everyone prevents exclusion.

Audio description is a description technique intended for people who have difficulty seeing. And since catering for difference often opens up new horizons, it may attract a wider audience.

### **Brief reminder of the audio description procedure:**

Audio description consists in describing the visual elements of a cinematographic work for blind and partially sighted people, to provide them with the essential components required to understand the work (décor, characters, movements, body

language). The recorded text is inserted between the dialogue and sound effects and mixed with the original sound track.

### **Public and programmes concerned:**

In France, there are 77,000 blind people and 1.2 million partially sighted (with visual acuity below 3/10 after correction).

Other people concerned by audio description include:

- elderly people whose cognitive capacities are diminishing
- sick people who are sometimes bothered by the rapidity of the moving image
- foreigners who are learning the language
- and for anyone who can see but who wants to listen to a film without looking at it (while driving, for example).

Some people will depend heavily on audio description to understand the film while others will use it as a simple back-up.

Audio description can be used for any type of film, television series or documentary, as the tastes and preferences of the visually impaired are as varied as those of a sighted audience.

<p><b>The Audio Description Charter</b></p>          <p><b>An ethical framework, basic principles:</b></p>          <p>Audio describers are creative writers in every sense of the</p>	<p>The following principles must be followed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ <b>Respect of the work</b> The work, style of the author and pace of the film must be respected. The describer not only conveys the information contained in the images, but also their emotional content, their overall effect and their poetry</li><li>➤ <b>Objectivity</b> The description must be given objectively in order not to impose the describer's own feelings but rather to provoke the listener's.</li></ul>
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term.

They must produce an original text based on a visual medium.

Describing a work means understanding, analysing and deciphering it in order to convey its message and trigger emotion through verbalisation.

The description must be precise and contain four main types of information: the people, the places, the time and the action. The describer must not interpret the images but describe them. The describer must not distort the information nor interfere with the way the story is told. Audio description is demanding. It requires precise writing, based on a very fine analysis of the image and sound track.

➤ **Respect of the listener**

The describer must adapt the description so that it is neither distracting nor tiring for the listener. The visually impaired do not need to know the story line because they can hear the dialogue.

The description must blend in with the film, remain out of the limelight and be the little voice whispering in the listener's ear. The description must turn it into a moment of pleasure!

## **The Audio Description Charter**

The description must contain the four main types of information: the people, the places, the time and the action.

### **Who**

The characters  
Their clothing and style  
Their body language  
Their physical features  
Their age  
Their expression

**Operating method:  
Description (1/2)**

A description is the imprint of an era or a culture.

Translating images with words is not as easy as it sounds.

**Where**

Places, scenery, atmosphere, interior decoration, etc., and, more particularly, changes of places.

**When**

Time frame: past, present, future

The season and time of the day

**What**

The action taking place, displacements, and any visible but soundless reactions which are often the most important descriptions

**Also to be included:**

Noise that cannot be identified immediately

Sub-titles, signs, written messages and significant symbols

The front and/or end credits

**To be avoided:**

Sound effects that can be immediately understood

Audible emotions

Technical cinematographic terms. However the message the director wants to convey must be described

Anticipation of characters' names or features

## **The Audio Description Charter**

### **Operating method: Description (2/2)**

Let the work breathe and act on its own

The visually impaired live in a world of sighted people

### **When:**

- during silences, between dialogues
- exceptional overlapping a dialogue only to provide essential information

### **Never encroach upon:**

- dialogue
- sound effects, when they complete the film or description
- the music when it is significant

### **It is essential to:**

- describe in the present tense
- describe in the third person
- avoid "we can see"
- describe objectively
- use complete sentences as far as possible
- adapt vocabulary to the type of film and respect the language register
- use rich, precise vocabulary, explaining any technical terms used
- only use subjective adjectives when describing an obvious characteristic
- mention colours that can be completed with an adjective
- complete any description once it has begun

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- avoid describing an image if it can be understood, particularly if it is not essential to understanding of the film</li> </ul> <p>Working in pairs helps to respect these principles.</p>
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<p><b>The Audio Description Charter</b></p> <p><b>Operating method: Recording</b></p>	<p>The voices of two actors, a woman and a man, are recommended. They are used to indicate a change of place and time, and for sub-titles.</p> <p>If voice over is used in the original work, it may be preferable to only use only one voice, of the opposite sex.</p> <p>It can be useful to record the audio description in the presence of the describer so that certain adjustments can be made, but it is not essential.</p> <p>The voice must be adapted to the emotional content of the scene and the pace of action but must nevertheless remain fairly neutral. If an actor with too strong a personality is used, he will be competing with the actor in the film.</p> <p>When mixing, the audio description must be perfectly audible, but in no case must it take over from the film.</p>
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## **The Audio Description Charter**

### **Budgeting description work**

It is difficult to estimate the time required for an audio description, which depends to a very large extent on the requirements of the film.

**The time required to produce an audio description includes:**

one or two initial viewings of the film

an initial description

research on technical and complex elements (documentary research)

stepping back and writing a “project” version

a typed draft of the description, including time-codes and audio cues

proofreading with the other describer

finalising and drafting of the final version

The time required by two describers for the description of a 90 minute film is about 60 to 70 hours, excluding recording.

## **The Audio Description Charter**

For consistent high quality audio description, the following is recommended:

Asking the director to proofread the description

Incorporating the audio description from the beginning of the post-production phase

**Conclusion**

Regularly organising working groups with visual impairments or, if possible, producing the description in collaboration with a visually impaired person trained in audio description.

Audio description involves analysis, research and creative writing which require appropriate professional training if the principles set out in this charter are to be correctly applied.

## **Annexe 4: Audio Description International's proposed guidelines for Audio Description (Supported by American Council of the Blind's Audio Description Project)**

"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."

Helen Keller

### **A Definition**

Audio Description (AD) makes the visual images of theatre, media and visual art accessible for people who are blind or have low vision. Using words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative, describers convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population and not fully realized by the rest of us—people who see but who may not observe.

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.

### **The Describer**

The person responsible for developing the description to be voiced.

As Canadian writer Joe Clark makes clear, describers and voicers serve the audience and the production, not themselves. He explains: "You're not providing descriptions to show off your vocabulary or to highlight your beautiful voice. You work for the production and the audience. A certain self-effacement is required."

### **Voicer (or Voice Talent)**

The person who voices the description (in some cases, often in the performing arts, the describer also is the voicer).

## **Preface**

These Standards have been “gathered” by a core committee of ACB’s Audio Description Project chaired by ACB’s Vice President Kim Charlson. The word “gathered” is used as the work is here is not, by and large, new: it is a “review of the literature,” a culling of material that exists in documents that are widely available. Generally, those documents are not the result of scientific research. But they reflect and in turn these standards are based on many years of experience with audio description in a wide range of contexts.

The Standards are intended to be overarching in nature, i.e., they are written to apply to audio description generally no matter the particular format in which it is used. There are, of course, significant distinctions that arise as describers work within media as opposed to developing a tour for a museum exhibition. Consequently, we have developed sub-sets of these standards that focus on Performing Arts, Media, and Visual Art. The initial draft of this document was reviewed by the aforementioned committee (including Thom Lohman of the Described and Captioned Media Program; Rick Boggs of We See TV; Bryan Gould of WGBH; Christopher Gray, the immediate past-president of ACB; Deborah Lewis, freelance describer; Rebecca McGinnis, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Pat Sheehan, the President of the Maryland State Council of the Blind; and Joel Snyder, Director, Audio Description Project) and will now be posted on the web for input from anyone interested via a wikidot.org page. The committee will monitor and review all contributions and a new version will be presented to the Audio Description Project Conference in Orlando, Florida, July 6-8, 2009. In addition, consideration Conference time will be allocated for further review of the Standards sub-sets on Media, Performing Arts, and Visual Art/Exhibitions.

Finally, we want to credit with a large measure of appreciation the original source material on which this document is based. All of the original material is available at the wikidot.org web page.

The material includes:

- Art Education for the Blind’s “Making Visual Art Accessible to People Who Are Blind and Visually Impaired”

- Audio Description Coalition Standards and Code of Conduct (the ADC Code of Conduct is reprinted, with permission, at the end of this document)
- “Audio Description Techniques” by Joe Clark (Canada)
- “Audio Description: The Visual Made Verbal” by Joel Snyder from The Didactics of Audio Visual Translation, edited by Jorge Diaz Cintas, John Benjamin Publishing, London, England and on-line course for Fractured University
- Described and Captioned Media Program “Description Key” (developed by DCMP and the American Foundation of the Blind)
- ITC (Independent Television Commission) Guidance on Audio Description (U.K.)
- National Captioning Institute Described Media “Style Guide”

## **Introduction**

### **The Audio Description User – Who Are “The Blind”?**

They are *not* "the blind." They are individuals -- housewives, scientists, artists, business people ... maybe you or me, sometime. They are unique individuals with a living with some degree of vision loss as the result of a wide range of causes. Most users of description are not totally blind; indeed, only 1-2% of the legally blind are congenitally blind (blind from birth); others are adventitiously blind or developed total blindness later in life. Most at one point had all or some of their sight and now they may have only peripheral vision, they may see only shapes, light and dark, colours, movement, shadows, blurs, or “blobs” -- or have "tunnel vision." Only 10% know Braille.

The American Foundation for the Blind reports that 21.2 million Americans have vision loss. While description was developed for people who are blind or visually impaired, many others may also benefit from description’s concise, objective “translation” of the key visual components of various art genres and social settings.

Audio Description is an “Assistive Technology”; it is meant to enhance, not replace the user’s own powers of observation.

## Observation

The well-trained describer is an eye witness. But an incredibly astute one. It's well-known in law enforcement that twenty eyewitnesses may relay twenty different versions of the same event.

- Describers must learn how to see the world anew. In his book, "Seen/Unseen: A Guide to Active Seeing," the photographer, John Schaefer, coins the phrase *visual literacy*. That's what describers must nurture. Schaefer refers to the need to 'increase your level of awareness and become an active "see-er."

- The best describers will truly notice all the visual elements that make up an image .....Just as Emily does in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." Looking back from the grave, she sees for the first time:

"I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Clocks ticking, Mama's sunflowers, food, coffee, new-ironed dresses, hot baths. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?" The Stage Manager answers: "No. The Saints and Poets maybe, they do, some."

Richard Boleslavsky teaches us that "We think that we see everything, and we don't assimilate anything. But in [working as a describer] we can't afford that. We are obliged to notice the material with which we work."

- Describers must see with a heightened awareness that allows us to inform even the sighted but casual observer. However, AD ends up being about describing far less than we see—there's never time enough to convey in words all that we see. As Cody Pfanshtiel remarked many years ago: "The eye is quicker than the fastest of mouths." And so, the audio describer must edit.

## Editing

It's clear that even the finest describer can never convey with words all that is seen with the eye. Description, then, becomes an exercise in what *not* to describe. We leave out far more than we

ultimately include in our descriptions. Audio Description is provided for a broad range of users, i.e., people with varying degrees of vision loss from description enthusiasts who are congenitally blind to those who have a relatively modest level of low vision. Indeed, the percentage of people in our audiences who have never had any useful sight is quite small. Thus, to a certain extent the describer's choices of what to describe are based on an understanding of blindness and low vision.

- Going from the general to the specific—start generally, creating a context, then move to details to enhance understanding and appreciation. Provide visual perspective as appropriate and as time allows. The initial information presented about a scene will create a foundation in the minds of the audience members;
- Use of colours—the ITC Standards explain: “Most visually impaired people have at some time seen colours and either retained the visual memory of colour or can remember the significance and impact of a particular colour. ... People who are blind from birth or from an early age cannot ‘see’ colours but they do understand the significance of a particular colour by its association. They may not ‘see’ green, but the colour of flower stalks, leaves and grass, which people can touch and smell does mean something.” When asked about the perception of color, a congenitally blind audio description user in Oregon recommended reading Mary O’Neill’s “Hailstones and Halibut Bones,” a children’s classic of poetry and colour.
- Inclusion of directional information—whether on a screen, a stage, or in front of an exhibition, some AD users will “see” if you tell them *where* to look. In addition, directional “pointers” can help AD users organize the information they hear, i.e., going from top to bottom, right to left, clockwise, etc. Echoing Justice Holmes’ caution, noted above, remember:
- Describe what is most essential for the viewer to know in order to understand and appreciate the image being described. The audio describer is part journalist, faithfully relaying the facts.

When/where: Time of day (is it light or dark/ Cloudy or sunny?) and location.

For example:

The sun sits low over the horizon. (Really? Is it a sunset or is the sun rising?)

A full moon

A clock: 7:00 a.m.

A city park

A 2-story brick townhouse

Under a wide portico

On a raised platform near a gazebo

Who: Who is in the image? What do they look like?

For example:

**Age**: one doesn't see someone's age unless the individual being described is wearing a button that proclaims, "I'm 60!" What does he/she look like? Those are the characteristics to cite, the things you see that prompt you to think that the individual is a certain age. In some description formats, of course, time is of the essence, and short-cuts include: In her late forties; in his sixties; pre-teen; teenage.

**Hair/Build/Clothing**: cropped brown hair; long blond hair; red-headed woman; slim; tall; stocky; dressed in a white pantsuit; wearing a blue floral dress; in a bright red sweater; the tuxedoed "Bond."

**Relationship**: Mother, father, son, brother-in-law, etc.—but take care to only specify if it is known.

**Characters / People**: Describe individuals by using the most significant physical characteristics. Identify ethnicity/race as it is known and vital to the comprehension of content. If it is, then all main characters' skin colours must be described—light-skinned, dark-skinned, olive-skinned. (Citing the race only of non-white individuals establishes "white" as a default and is unacceptable.)

What: what's happening? What actions are most important for a clear understanding and appreciation of the image(s)?

Describe expressive gestures and movement (resist any temptation to convey what you may feel is inferred by them, such as an emotional state).

The oft-referenced “first rule of description” is to “Describe what you see” or W.Y.S.I.W.Y.S. – “WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU SAY”

What is the critical visual information that is inaccessible to people who are blind or have low vision? Some have already been noted: key plot elements, people, places, actions, objects, unknown sound sources not mentioned in the dialogue or made obvious by what one hears.

Example: Mention who answers the phone—not that the phone is ringing. It’s not necessary to describe obvious sound cues. At times, the source of a sound may not be clear—a description may be appropriate

- Specificity creates images in the minds’ eye to a far greater degree than a general reference. It is more interesting to hear the items in a mound of clutter if time permits than to say, “The attic is cluttered.” If at all possible, don’t take a series of specific, separate actions/events/images and describe them as one. For example: is it just a smile or a broad grin? Similarly, is the image a photograph—color or black-and-white?—what size? How many? (5 men, 6 airplanes) position? (He comes up behind her. A car turns left.)
- Less Is More. Description cannot and need not convey every visual image on display. Quality audio description is not a running commentary. Listeners should be allowed to hear actors’ voices, sound effects, music, and ambiance in a museum—or experience silence throughout the description.

The ITC Standards cautions that “However tempting it is to use colourful imagery and elegant turns of phrase, clarity is the main aim of audio description. As a rule, too much description can be exhausting or even irritating. The [image being described] should be allowed to breathe from time to time, allowing [it and its] atmosphere to come through the describer must learn to weed out what is not essential.”

And Joe Clark adds (in speaking of description for media), “Describe when necessary, but do not necessarily describe.”

- Language: Audio Description is a literary art form. It's a type of poetry--a haiku. It provides a verbal version of the visual—we use words that are:
  - Succinct,
  - Vivid, and
  - Imaginative

To convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to a significant 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.

- Be clear, concise, and conversational

Use “everyday” terms. Describe a technical term, *then* name it, e.g., “she bends at the knees, a pli  ”; limit the use of slang or jargon unless appropriate to the content/image being described. Describers are writing for a broad audience.

- Point of View and Narrative Tense

Deliver description in present tense, in active voice (e.g., “Ted breaks the window,” is preferable to, “The window was broken by Ted.”) Use third-person narrative style to show neutrality and noninterference.

- Consider your audience

If you know that your audience is primarily young people, use simple language structure in your descriptions. Similarly, match vocabulary to the material being described.

- Consider the material

Use language that is consistent with the content of the material.

- “We See”

Avoid telling your guests that “we see” or notice or view—it’s a given.

- Vary Verb Choices

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, as appropriate, with “sashay,” “stroll,” “skip,” “stumble,” or “saunter”?

- Definite/Indefinite Articles

Use “a” instead of “the”— a sword, instead of the sword, unless there’s only one sword. If the sword has already been introduced, it becomes “the” sword.

- Pronouns

Use pronouns only when it is clear to whom or what the pronoun refers.

- Multiple Meanings

Identify words that have multiple meanings; be sure that the intended meaning is conveyed.

- Adverbs/Gerunds -ly words and -ing words

i.e., suspiciously, furiously, nervously

Ask yourself: “What is it that you see that prompts you to think that he/she looks suspicious, furious, or nervous? Instead: “raises her eyebrows”, “clenches her fists”, “twists a napkin”. Use “-ing” words in phrases, not as continuing present tense, e.g., “Stomping up the stairs, he...” instead of, “He is stomping up the stairs.”

- Objectivity

The best audio describers objectively recount the visual aspects of an image. *Subjective or qualitative judgments or comment* get in the way—they constitute an 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 we do not say "He is furious" or "She is upset." Rather, "He's clenching his fist" or "She is crying." Rather than "It's a dream." or "She dies." the objective describer might say: "Now, through a white mist, Joan runs through a field." or, "His head lolls back and his eyes close."

As Nin and Lippman observed (in the text box, above), there is no specific, objective thing.

- Metaphor/Simile

Describe shapes, sizes, and other essential attributes of images by comparison to objects or items/areas that are familiar to the intended audience.

For example, is the Washington Monument 555 feet tall or is it as high as fifty elephants stacked one on top of the other? Thus, we try to convey our descriptions with a kind of “inner vision” that results in a linguistically vivid evocation of the image being described.

There aren’t any elephants there—but you may evoke them in order to convey a particular image (the height of the Washington Monument). Yes, a contradiction of the describer’s “first rule”—Say Only What See—but it works in certain instances because of what Paul Valery and Jonathan Swift observed:

- Labels

Since the ultimate goal is an image created in the minds of our constituents, avoid labelling with an interpretation that is inevitably unique to you, the describer.

Indeed, “labelling” – “naming” is not *describing*. Labels lead us to pigeon-hole and we tend to then dismiss the thing we see.

- Censorship

Within the constructs of quality description, describers must convey *all* of the visual elements of the material being described. Describers must not censor information for any personal reason such as their own discomfort with the material or a political belief, i.e., describers must relay objectively the visual elements of nudity, sexual acts, violence, etc. Our constituents have the right to know the critical visual material that is evident to sighted people and we have the obligation to convey that material. If a describer feels that describing particular material will make him/her uncomfortable, s/he should not accept this assignment.

- Vocal Skills

We make meaning with our voices.

Some studies suggest that within face-to-face spoken interpersonal conversation the majority of content is communicated non-verbally, either through gesture and facial expression but also through a variety of speech and oral interpretation fundamentals:

Pronunciation

Enunciation

Breath Control

Volume

Pause

Inflection

Pace  
Tempo  
Phrasing  
Tone

For instance, say the following phrase aloud:

If you agree with its sentiments, I suspect that you have few female friends.

If you don't, say the same words aloud—don't change their order—and with your voice alone, change the meaning so you convey a sense that is quite the opposite of the "original."

Punctuation allows us to make visible what we do with our voices quite naturally in conversation; what I hope you were able to accomplish in this exercise with your voice alone.

#### Enunciation / Word Rate

Speak clearly and at a rate that can be understood.

Generally, a rate of 160 wpm (words per minute) is an acceptable pace. Try speaking descriptions to yourself to make sure they flow casually.

#### Pronunciation

Prepare in advance and/or use transliterations to indicate pronunciation.

Narrators' voices must be distinguishable from other voices in a production, but they must not be unnecessarily distracting, as with recognizable celebrity voices.

#### Consonance

Vocal delivery should be consonant with the nature of the material being described. The voice should match the pace (including word rate, noted above), energy and volume of the material. Allow the performance to set the tone and rhythm of the description, remembering that the performance, not the describer, should be the focus. Just as the describer should not assume a detached, lecturing or clinical tone, the describer should not attempt to project him- or herself into the performance as another performer. Example: The language and delivery to describe a fight scene would differ from that used to describe a love scene.

## **AUDIO DESCRIPTION STANDARDS/TECHNIQUES**

## **PERFORMING ARTS**

### Theatre

- General:

- With most performing arts, the describer should allow listeners to participate in the “willing suspension of disbelief” by describing in terms of the story rather than the theatrical experience. Avoid stage directions—stage right, house right, and downstage as well as words like “enters” and “exits.”

- Avoid theatrical references or jargon, especially names for technical equipment and devices, which would draw listeners’ attention away from their involvement in the story (“break the fourth wall”) and may introduce confusing, unknown terms.

Example: Say “John [character’s name] is 6 feet tall with curly black hair ...” instead of “the actor playing John is 6 feet tall ....”  
“Susan runs from the kitchen” rather than “Susan exits the stage.”

The exception to the “maintain the illusion” caution would be when the style of the production is presentational, calling attention to its theatricality. Because the production makes the audience aware that it is “watching a play,” it’s appropriate for the describer to do so as well.

- Some organizations utilize a pair of describers to cover a performance. For instance, the first describer describes the performance while the second describer prepares, and sometime delivers the pre-show notes (and intermission notes if applicable) and serves as backup describer. A backup describer is prepared to describe the event if the original describer is not available.

- Give listeners a means of providing the management with feedback on the description by announcing the process at the end of the description and/or providing a Braille/large print handout where reception equipment is distributed.

- In addition to performing arts events, live description may be provided for live broadcast programs such as Presidential inaugurations, space launches, national disaster news coverage, etc. With no opportunity for previews or pre-show notes to provide background information or preliminary description of certain

general elements, consider using some silences to describe the “big picture” rather than what is specifically onscreen.

- To Script or Not To Script:

- Some performing arts description producers will have a describer preview a performance (as production schedules allow) enough times to allow for the development of a description script. Others depend on one or two previews where notes are made and the describer provides description in a more “extemporaneous” manner. If time and schedules allow, the development of a script permits the careful consideration of the various fundamentals of description outlined earlier in this document. The describer using a script does not, of course, read the script without looking at the live performance; he/she must know the script well enough to use the script as a prompt and be free to describe extemporaneously when “change happens.”

- Scheduling of Description:

- Typically, audio description is offered at one to three performances throughout the run of an extended series of performances, often one evening performance and one matinee. This, of course, limits the AD users in their flexibility in scheduling attendance at performing arts events. Some organizations ask for advance notice of two weeks or more in order to provide AD as a special request. In an effort to put the AD user on a par with any other performing arts patron, certain producers will “cast” a describer who can attend selected rehearsals, develop an AD script and be available at every performance (similar to an understudy). If no one desires the service, the describer is free to go.

- For touring productions, experiments have been made with scripts that have been produced in one locale that can be shared with describers in another city.

- Increasingly, certain productions have recorded description keyed to lighting cues and accessed via PDAs attached to seatbacks. The descriptions (as well as captions and simultaneous translation) are available at any performance.

- Equipment:

- With the exception of recorded description noted earlier, audio description is delivered wirelessly via microphones (headset or steno-mask style), transmitters, and receivers with earpieces used

by AD patrons. Generally, the transmissions are accomplished via infra-red (line-of-sight) or FM radio systems. FM systems can be portable and are often shared by multiple theatres.

- Pre-Show and Intermission Notes:

- The purpose of pre-show notes is to prepare the patron by including descriptions that the describer will not have time to give during the performance. In addition to the credits on the playbill, the pre-show notes cover descriptions of the sets, with their entrances, exits, levels, placement of furniture, etc.; the physical characteristics of the characters, the roles they play, their costumes, any gestures or mannerisms they use repeatedly; dance movement; recurring staging techniques; and any props that are significant. Because time permits, all these descriptions should be complete and detailed, tightly organized and not exceed 10–15 minutes. Most describers prepare scripted pre-show notes to be sure that they're covering everything in a coherent, organized and timely manner. Productions with intermissions provide a second opportunity to provide additional information.

- The pre-show notes are also the place to define any terminology that might be used in the performance. In a period piece, terms of clothing or architecture might be explained. Unusual props can be defined. The remaining time before the curtain can be filled with the director's notes, articles about the playwright, the actors' biographies, the appearance of the audience, etc.

Note: Listeners are trying to absorb and remember a great deal of verbal information. Describe settings and costumes in the order they appear. As much as possible, describe each setting in the same order (left to right and top to bottom, for example).

When many of the characters wear costumes that are variations of the same style, it's helpful to establish the basic style of the male and female costumes ("most of the men wear three-piece suits, white shirts and string ties while the women's dresses are high-necked, long-sleeved and have straight skirts to the floor") and then describe the specifics for each costume.

- If the play has a complex plot and/or a confusing set of characters, there may be a synopsis in the playbill. Just as this

information is helpful to sighted audience members, sharing this information with listeners during pre-show notes may aid their appreciation of the performance and the description. Make clear that the information comes from the program so listeners understand that everyone has access to this information—that the describer is not providing special information because the listener may have trouble following the material. For example, if a character wears bustles, the term will arise in describing the costumes. To confirm that everyone knows what a “bustle” is, tuck this into the pre-show notes without calling attention to it, with something like, “The women’s long skirts puff out in back, padded over the hips and under their skirts, with bustles.” If it’s important to the plot, try to repeat the information during the description for those who didn’t hear the pre-show notes.

- If there’s a delay in the start of the performance or during a scene change or an emergency in the audience, describe what the sighted audience can see—a large group has just arrived and is being seated, the curtain is caught on a piece of scenery, etc. Remember the rule of “say what you see”—don’t report something you hear on the backstage intercom, etc. If it’s not apparent why there’s a delay, it’s fine to say so and that reassures listeners that the describer is still there.

- In productions with intermissions and a great deal of information to cover in pre-show notes, consider limiting the pre-show notes to overall production information (credits, etc.) and the first act’s details (settings, costumes, characters, etc.). Then, return during the final minutes of intermission with notes to describe the second act’s details, important reminders from the pre-show notes, and, if time allows, share additional information from the playbill.

Note: At the end of the pre-show notes and at the end of the first act, tell listeners that during intermission what you will share with them so they may decide if they want to return in time to hear that information. Assuming that some of the listeners will not hear the full intermission notes, repeat the essential information during the second act whenever possible. If the new information for the second act is very brief, listeners may appreciate its inclusion at the end of the pre-show notes or while the house lights are dimming for the second act so they won’t have to shorten their intermission activities to return for the second set of notes. Don’t assume that all listeners have heard the pre-show notes or that all

remember everything they heard. As time allows, repeat the essential information as part of the description during the performance.

- “Stepping On Lines”:
  - Descriptions are usually delivered during pauses between lines of dialogue or quiet moments, avoiding other critical sound elements. But since it is more important to make a production understandable than to preserve every detail of the original soundtrack, the describer will speak over dialogue and other audio when necessary. In most instances, a describer may talk over background music or underscoring as well as the lyrics of a repeated chorus of a song.
  - And, as noted earlier, it is appropriate to let pauses or quiet moments pass without a description. Listeners want to hear the performance first and the description second. The dialogue, the sounds—and even the silences—are telling the story and must be experienced.
  - Use caution in talking over a “song played on the radio” because its recognition by the audience and/or the audience’s hearing its content may be important to setting a mood, recalling an era, making an emotional statement, etc.

Example: Esther is talking non-stop about making a pie, but she is quietly taking a gun from a drawer. The describer may need to speak over her dialogue because the audience will hear a gunshot before she stops talking about making the pie.

- Sound Effects:
  - Include any sound effects in the timing of descriptions, e.g., he turns away from her and she pulls out a revolver. [BANG] He falls over a desk [CLATTER].
  - Usually a sound effect, or the event leading up to it, is described just before it happens:  
“The burglar drops his sack.” [THUD] Sometimes it can be even more effective after the action. “Waving their arms they run towards the platform...” [Chuff chuff... the sound of a train pulling away] “The train is pulling out of the station.”

- In a live setting, it may be warranted to alert AD users of upcoming sound effects as they could affect guide dogs accompanying a patron.

- Identification:

- Identify characters as they have been identified in the production. Introduce them only after they've been introduced in the dialogue. Consistently identify people/characters by name. Use a character's name only when sighted audience members know the name. When an unknown character appears, refer to the person by a physical characteristic used in his/her initial description until his/her name is revealed. Once everyone knows the character's proper name, tie the name to the physical description at the first opportunity ("John, the redheaded man") and afterwards use only the character's name.

- Be certain to describe entrances and exits—who and where—especially when there's nothing audible to indicate someone has joined or left the scene.

Note: It may be helpful to create a list of the established names for each character for reference during the description. A list of commonly paired couples may also be useful in plays with difficult character names. Some AD users have suggested that once the material has identified a character, the describer could match the character's name with the actor's voice by mentioning the character's name just before s/he speaks. Although the describer usually doesn't need to repeat the voice identification, this might be necessary after a character has been silent or absent for a long time or if several voices are similar and it's important to know exactly who is saying what at a particular point.

- Timing:

- Theatrical surprises should, ideally, come at the same time for all audience members. If characters' appearances or actions, hidden identities, costumes, sight gags, sound effects, etc. happen as a surprise to sighted audience members, don't spoil the surprise for listeners by describing (and revealing) them in advance.

Example: If a character is in disguise, he becomes "the man" rather than "John wears a disguise." Use a neutral term "the figure in red" when characters are disguising their gender. If the action that accompanies a sound effect will result in a reaction from the

audience, treat this as if describing a sight gag. Time the description to allow listeners to react at the same time as sighted audience members.

Example: If the audience sees something happening that might “warn them” of the possibility of, say, a loud noise, be sure to describe that action. For instance, “Pat” loads a rifle, so we know that there’s a possibility s/he will fire it.

- With experience, describers learn to gauge when laughter and applause have peaked and begun to die down. If possible, hold description until the audience begins to quiet. If not, speak loudly when describing over loud laughter, music or applause.

- When an effect will be repeated, try to describe it the first time in a way that allows a “shorthand” reference later.

Example: In a play where characters vigorously smoke cigarettes to underscore their tension, describe the first instance as, “Mary and John light cigarettes, inhale and exhale deeply.” On later occurrences, as listeners understand the pattern of their behaviour, simply say, “Smoking again.”

- Sounds:

- Describe the source of sounds that may not be immediately recognizable within the program but are pertinent to understanding and appreciation of the content.

- Dance

Note: The narrative that follows is based on concepts put forth originally by Rudolph Laban, codified under the rubric “Laban Movement Analysis” (LMA). It is offered here as a basis from which standards for dance description may be developed.

LMA offers describers an expanded range of seeing and a more specific vocabulary for describing movement. There is a significant difference between saying what someone is doing and describing how they do it. Description is often about what a mover is doing. But to convey as much information in as few words as possible, they often need to describe how the mover is accomplishing the action. What sort of pathway in space does the mover follow? How does the shape or “attitude” of their body convey character or context? What dynamic qualities of the

movement flavor its meaning? The describer needs to choose concise wording that will capture the primary elements, communicating to the listener the most essential visual cues.

Laban wrote that:

“Pure dancing has no describable story. It is frequently impossible to outline the content of a dance in words, although one can always describe the movement. ... the artist playing the role of Eve can pluck the apple in more than one way, with movements of varying expression. She can pluck the apple greedily and rapidly or languidly and sensuously. ... Many other forms of action are possible, and each of these will be characterized by a different kind of movement. ... In defining the kind of movement as greedy, as sensuous, or detached, one does not define merely what one has actually seen. What the spectator has seen may have been only a peculiar, quick jerk or a slow gliding of the arm. The impression of greed or sensuousness is the spectator’s personal interpretation of Eve’s state of mind...”

Here Laban suggests the objectivity principle of Audio Description and the acronym: WYSIWYS: what you see is what you say. AS noted throughout these standards: it’s important to describe accurately and vividly, but to allow the listener to create meaning. (Eve snatches the apple “with a quick jerk of the arm” not “with a look of greedy guilt”.)

A blind AD user once commented, “I never go to dance because all I get is the music, and if I don’t like the music, it’s really boring!” When asked what he would need to hear in the description in order not to be bored, he replied, “the story”. Of course, in the case of modern dance often the images are abstract—there is no story!” With dance description, it’s important to find the “story” it tells: what main idea does the dancing communicate to the viewer, what is the essence of the dance? What information would be most important to allow a blind audience member to experience the performance as fully as possible, to help him follow the meaning of the choreography? Which elements comprised the structure and themes of the choreography, and what words would most succinctly convey those ideas?

For example, one piece might be mostly “about” spatial patterns and sequences of group clustering and scattering; the dancers’ specific movements may be less important, and their individual

characteristics (gender, hair color, body shape, etc.) may not matter at all with respect to the content being expressed. In another piece, where each dancer plays a unique character, those particulars, along with various movement combinations and body attitude, can be meaningful factors.

Attached below is a portion of the describers' script for one of Axis Dance Company's pieces: "Dust", choreographed by Victoria Marks. The script is designed to be spoken while the movement occurs; viewing a tape of the piece, you would notice that much has been left unsaid in order to focus on communicating mood, theme and choreographic structure, while leaving aural space for the impact of the musical score. We invite you to test the description by having it read aloud to you. To what extent does hearing the dance allow you to see?

Audio Describers' Script for a Live Dance Performance (segment)

DUST

By Victoria Marks

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR DESCRIBERS:

*This dance is structured to employ many types of contrasts.*

*Examples include....*

*Visual contrasts: light/dark, warm tones/cool tones, patterns/full light, one or two dancers/large group.*

*Sound contrasts: nature sounds/music, quietness (serene sounds)/active (agitated) sounds.*

*Choreographic idea contrasts: stillness/mobility, passive/active, initiator/follower, intensity (seriousness)/lighthearted busyness, isolation/interaction.*

*Note that the activeness/passivity, stillness/mobility of each dancer at any given choreographic moment is not based on who's in a wheelchair/"disabled" or not. Sometimes the choreographer purposely turns that around.*

DESCRIPTION Descriptions delivered in real time.

A small pool of light reveals a woman lying still, face down. From left, a second woman drives her motorized wheelchair into the light.

2

She pauses next to the prone woman, then reaches down to lift the woman's shoulder and change her pose.

3

The woman in the wheelchair continues to pose the other, moving one body part at a time. The woman on the floor moves only as she is molded, holding each new shape.

[SLIGHT PAUSE]

The mov-er steers her wheelchair to gently nudge the mov-ee onto her back.

4

The passive dancer on the floor is softly pulled and pushed, her head lifted, her back lightly touched, to bring her to sitting. The wheelchair presses into her from behind; she slides to a crouch, then a squat. In stages, her partner stands her up. The standing woman now turns her head—on her own—toward the wheelchair dancer. Light fades to black.

5

Light comes up. The standing woman faces a new dancer. She who was passive is now the initiator. One press of her forefinger against the other's breastbone sets off a cascade of movements. The first backs away and watches as the new dancer flails and dangles, drops to her knees, her elbow, then splays onto her back. Lights fade out.

6

The circle of light comes up. A new dancer stands beside the splayed woman, slicing the air with sharp arcing arm movements. The splayed woman lifts her head, as the other gazes upward. Light fades to black.

[PAUSE, MUSIC CHANGES]

7

Full stage lights up. From left, a man and woman, in time to the music, prance and dip forward. They are met, from right, by a

dancer motoring her wheelchair on, dragging another who hangs on to its back. Now dancers converge and scatter busily all over the stage—two drive wheelchairs, five are on foot. Greetings, hugs, taps, re-groupings. Dancers wave, bump, tease, chase, shove, lean, flop onto and roll or climb over each other, scurrying and whizzing playfully from place to place.

8

Now, as lights begin to dim, the dancers spread across the stage and slow to stillness, pausing in tableau. Lighting creates an uneven geometry of shadows slashing across the floor. In unison, the dancers begin to turn slowly in place. Now all are seen in right profile.

9

Now their backs all face us.

10

[CHIMES]

11

The dancers continue their slow-motion rotation.

12

Now all are in left profile

13

At left, suddenly a wheelchair dancer sweeps her arm up and circles her chair to the right. At this cue, a man at right spins, then reaches out to draw her to him. While some continue their slow, in-place rotation, others break rank and repeat some of the earlier greeting, reaching, running, and pushing. Each always returns to a still patch of light and rejoins the ongoing group rotation.

14

Small groups step forward, then back into place. Now all pause, in tableau again, their backs to us.

15

In unison, all look over their right shoulder then turn toward us.

16

They are still.

17

The two at right turn away.

18

The two at center turn away.

19

The remaining three turn away.

20

Steadily, evenly, all rotate to their left, to face the far left corner.

21-22

Abruptly breaking the spell, a woman dashes from right to left, slicing through the group. She flings herself to the ground, then scrambles up and races back as the others pull away from her and stride off left. She repeats the run and slide, left alone on stage. The lights have brightened and the floor pattern disappears. The lone dancer runs off as others return along her same diagonal path (from far left to close right). They are tugging, shoving, catching and lifting each other. Some push, roll and dart past others to advance along the diagonal and scatter offstage right.

23

Now all but two have exited. They pause, stare at each other, and one runs off right, leaving the other standing alone.

24

Body erect, she gradually turns her back to us...

25

...then pivots slowly on one foot then the other to complete her rotation.

26

Now she looks at us, then walks forward, gazing across the audience.

27

The light brightens on her as she bends forward, hands to her right knee, and unfastens her prosthetic lower leg. She sets it upright in front of her. It stands alone as she kneels behind.

28

Crouching, she slides left on her knees.

29

She glances at us, leans forward to peer at the leg, reaching out slowly with her index finger to poke the leg and tip it over. As she sits up, another dancer, in a separate pool of light to the left, reaches upward, arching her back, then crumples to the floor, face down.

### Opera

To be developed

### Special Events

To be developed

## **Audio Description Standards**

### **Media**

- General:
  - Audio description for film, broadcast television and DVD is scripted and recorded on an audio track separate from the material's soundtrack. This process allows the describer to write complete, accurate descriptions that will precisely fit during the available pauses between dialogue or critical sound elements.
  - Read the script aloud at the rate it will be read for recording to verify its timing.
  - If a description is essential and a silence is especially short, the describer may have to step on the first syllable or two of dialogue or narration. This often occurs when the "next voice" must be identified so listeners will understand the speaker's vantage point.
  - Allow listeners to appreciate the media's score without interjecting descriptions. Only interrupt for vital, timely information that must be described during the music.
  - The narrator's voice should be "in consonance" with, should complement the material—it should be distinct from the voices of

the characters and/or the program's narrator and mixed to sound as natural to the work as possible. The description serves the production and should blend into it.

- Identification:

- As with other art forms, characters in film and video may be introduced but unnamed. Use a significant physical characteristic to identify them in descriptions.

Note: The relationships between characters may not be apparent, but making it so is the filmmaker's responsibility—not the describer's. Refer to these relationships only after they have been revealed within the context of the media.

- Scene Changes:

- Scene changes can be confusing particularly when the soundtrack does not indicate a change. Simplicity is always a guide: "In the bedroom," "At the police station," etc. Actions, characters, and details can be confusing if we don't know where we are. When there's a change of place, start the description with the location ("general to the specific").

Example: "In their bedroom, John and Mary embrace tightly and kiss on the lips." The preceding scene took place with the whole family gathered around the dining table and nothing on the soundtrack indicates we've changed locale.

- On occasion describers use the word "now" or "next" to indicate a change of scene. Because there will be many opportunities that seem to call for the use this word, use it only when absolutely necessary.

- As time permits, describe montages of images, but be succinct and clear. Similarly, a series of still images, such as those often used during a documentary interview, can be summarized to highlight certain subjects being discussed by the person or people being interviewed.

- Passage of Time:

- As with scene changes, indicate passages of time that are essential to the comprehension or appreciation of a program's content. Do not interpret the passage of time specifically, however, unless objective evidence supports it.

- When describing certain passages of time, such as flashbacks or dream sequences, describe the visual cues that let the audience know there is a flashback. For younger audiences, it is sometime impractical to use describing conventions that one might use for adults. In some cases, it is necessary to explicitly tell the audience what is happening rather than describing the action (e.g., flashback or dream sequence).

- Address time shifts (flash backs or visions of the future) in relation to the character. Music and visual effects may further identify time changes.

Example: “Lighting shifts to pale amber as George takes his childhood place at the family dinner table.”

- Use “while” and “as” to join two actions only if there is a connection between them.

Example: “John picks up the knife as Jill turns away.”

- “Foreshadowing”:

- Sometimes a describer will describe what’s about to appear because there’s no silence for the information when it does appear. For instance, the audio description of what’s currently occurring and the current background noise may indicate that a waterfall; the describer may need to say “In a moment, a NASCAR racetrack with a dozen cars circling the track.” This alerts viewers with low vision that the racetrack isn’t onscreen at present.

- Occasionally there’s no silent opportunity to describe something essential to listeners’ understanding while that specific visual image is on the screen. The describer may need to omit a less significant description of what’s onscreen in order to interject the critical description.

- Consistency:

- Utilizing the same character names and/or vocabulary throughout a production or series of productions is essential. For instance, on a longer production, often more than one description writer will work on its description script. It’s critical that the draft final script is reviewed in its totality for consistency.

- Jargon:
  - Just as a describer for a live performance should avoid theatrical jargon or references, a film or video describer should avoid calling attention to the filmmaking process. Generally it's appropriate to avoid filmmaking jargon and reference to filmmaking techniques, e.g., "close-up" or "fade to black."
  
- Point of View:
  - Describe the point of view when appropriate—"from above," "from space," "moving away," "flying low over the sandy beach," etc. It is understood that a film/video/DVD is being viewed; repeated references to the screen are unnecessary.
  
  - Occasionally, the audience is directly engaged, particularly with children's material or educational productions. An on-screen character might ask the audience to "Watch me and follow along," or an instructor might ask, "Can you see what color the liquid is turning in the beaker?" In such cases, it is important for the audience members to know that it is they who are being addressed (as opposed to an on-screen character). One way to accomplish this is to refer to the audience as "you."
  
- Logos / Credits:
  - Treat logos as any other image to be described and read the company name(s).
  
  - Reading disclaimers and credits at the beginning and end of films, videos and television programs is an important function of audio description. In addition, the describer should read text and subtitles. Generally, on first appearance, text or subtitles can be introduced with a phrase such as, "Words appear" or "Subtitles appear." Subsequently, tone of voice may be employed to draw a distinction between descriptions of on-screen action and the reading of text or subtitles.
  
- Note: Because the describer can never read as rapidly as the onscreen credits appear and disappear, the describer must "edit" this material and may include a line such as "Other credits follow."
  
- Often, some or all of the opening credits appear over the beginning of the action. In this situation, attempt to describe the action in sync with the material and read the credits before or after their actual appearance.

- Enhanced Description
  - For DVDs, enhanced description can be employed to provide additional detail via a link to a pop-up window or even a hyper-link to a website.

## **AUDIO DESCRIPTION STANDARDS**

### **VISUAL ART / EXHIBITIONS**

Note: Much of the material in this section is adapted from guidelines posted at [www.artbeyondsight.org](http://www.artbeyondsight.org) and Art Education for the Blind's (AEB) landmark 1996 publication *Making Visual Art Accessible to People Who Are Blind and Visually Impaired*. AEB refers to audio description for visual art as “verbal description.”

- Definition:
  - Verbal description uses nonvisual language to convey the visual world. In a museum or at an exhibition of any sort, a verbal description includes standard information included on a label, such as the name of the artist, nationality, title of the artwork, date, dimensions or scale of the work, media and technique. More important, verbal description includes a description of the work.
- Museum Tours
  - Verbal description as part of a touch tour enhances the visitor's tactile experience. It can also provide access to a museum's collection when the works of art are not available to touch. When a group of visitors includes blind, visually impaired, and sighted visitors, museum professionals or docents can incorporate in-depth verbal description into their regular tour. If a classroom teacher conducts the tour, it is advisable for educators to visit the museum or historical site first to prepare the verbal description.
- Audio Guides
  - Some museums create an additional audio guide for blind and visually impaired visitors or include extensive verbal description of artworks in their standard audio guide. Sighted museum visitors report that they benefit from this practice as well. Following a “universal design” concept, exhibit designers are increasingly combining standard audio tours with audio descriptions, an “all-in-one” concept.
- Classroom Lessons / Literacy

- Verbal description and discussion about the work of art can be a part of a class that precedes or follows a museum visit. Teachers can incorporate verbal description of art, architecture, and design objects into history, social science, math, and other classes. Precise and organized description is one of the basic tools of effective communication. It can improve students' awareness of their environment and enrich their vocabulary.

- This notion represents a relatively new application for audio description: as an aid to literacy. As you might imagine, some "picture books" for toddlers 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 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 description, these books (or children's videos) are made accessible to kids who have low vision or are blind and simultaneously all kids develop more sophisticated language skills.

- Numerous studies have shown the value of captions to children in the development of literacy. In a similar vein, a comparable benefit might be observed in children exposed to audio description. Description—with its focus on observation, clarity, and efficiency of language use—can build more sophisticated literacy in children who are blind, who have low vision and in \*all\* children.

- **Multisensory Books**

- Multisensory art books created for people who are blind or have limited sight integrate verbal description, high-resolution reproductions of the images, a tactile component, and sometimes an audio component.

- **Practical Considerations:**

### **For Educator or Docent-Led Tours**

- Verbal description is used throughout an exhibition to describe displays, to respond to particular questions, and to encourage dialogue. The pace and level of detail of description can be

adapted to individuals based on their degree of sight loss and their prior experience making art or looking at art.

- When planning a tour, keep in mind that verbal description adds time. Therefore, fewer works may be included on a tour. A general rule of thumb is to use half the number of works you would use in a tour without verbal description. So it's important to carefully select the works for your tour.

- Develop verbal description scripts for the objects on your tour and review them with visually impaired advisors for effective language, clarity and length of the descriptions, and appropriate pace of the tour. Verbal description is also an essential part of a touch tour or a tour that includes tactile diagrams or tactile elements. As verbal description skills increase, these scripts will serve as guidelines, rather than as a text to be memorized.

- When first meeting a group that includes people who are blind or visually impaired, briefly describe the lobby or meeting space. Then, so that you may adjust your tour to your visitors needs, find out more about the type and degree of visual impairment. As with all audiences, try to relate the individual's life experiences to the content in the work of art. Throughout your tour, include brief descriptions of gallery spaces through which you pass and museum architecture. You might include the size of the space, type of art, or other general information about the atmosphere or ambiance of the museum.

- It is important to keep verbal description separate from information about the historical context. If your tour includes both sighted and visually impaired people, present your verbal description first. This creates equal opportunity for further discussion of historical context, biography of the artist, or other information important for all audiences to understand the work.

- One strategy frequently used during school-aged group tours could be used with all groups: elicit audience response through directed questioning. If you have an integrated class, with both sighted and visually impaired students, include everyone in the verbal-description process. Ask sighted students to describe elements in the work through directed questioning. This creates an engaging atmosphere and strengthens observation skills. At the

end of each description, restate student responses and summarize observations.

- Get feedback. After the description of the first work, ask one of the tour participants if the description is meeting their needs or if you need to make any adjustments.

At the end of a tour for people with visual impairments, take the opportunity to emphasize the organization's accessibility features and programming. Create a sense of welcome and encourage a future relationship with the organization.

### **For Audio Guides or Audio-described Self-guided Tours**

- Once you have developed verbal-description scripts, adapt them to create an audio guide that all visitors can use in the galleries independently. For the user with visual impairments, incorporate verbal description with navigational and orientation cues. When designing a tour, consider the effect of frequent physical changes in the galleries, such as chairs that are moved, deinstallations, or construction.

- Museum staff who distribute audio guides to visitors should provide a short orientation on how to use the player and guide. The player should have some type of neck strap so that a user has both hands free to use the buttons, hold a tactile, or use a cane or other assistive device.

- Depending on the needs and resources of a particular organization, delivery mechanisms will vary. Some choices include: audio cassette, CD, digital wands, or concealed triggering mechanisms. The last three mechanisms are digital methods that allow for layers of description and the option to choose between various exhibits.

- Generally, visually impaired visitors need orientation and navigational information that can be incorporated throughout the described tour. Some tours will keep this information on a separate track or layer of the tour allowing the sighted user to skip such information.

- Using infrared or FM systems (similar to those used in a performing arts or movie theater setting), AD users can privately access an audio description of a program, lecture, video, or performance.

## **Creating the Descriptions:**

### Subject, Form, and Colour

- The basic object-label information is followed by a general overview of the subject matter and composition of the work. Generally, a coherent description should provide visual information in a sequence, allowing a blind person to assemble, piece by piece, an image of a highly complex work. First describe the explicit subject, that is, what is represented in the work. For example, "This painting features a recycled Savarin coffee can filled with about eighteen paintbrushes." Next describe the composition and give an overall impression of the work. With respect to works of art, include in this description the color tones and the mood or atmosphere. Many people who have lost their sight have a visual memory of colours.

### Orient the Viewer with Directions

- Specific and concrete information is required to indicate the location of objects or figures in a work of art. A useful directional method is to refer to the positions of the numbers on a clock. Most blind people are familiar with this method of providing direction. For example, in referring to a person's face, you would describe the mouth as being at six o'clock. Also, when describing a figure depicted in a work of art, remember that the image is the equivalent of a mirror image. Right and left can be very ambiguous terms unless they are qualified. Accordingly, you should describe the figure according to its right or left, and always qualify this description. Refer to the viewer's orientation to right and left, as well. For example, "The woman's right hand, which is on your left, holds a small goblet."

### Focus on the Style

- The style of a work of art refers to the features that identify a work as being by a particular artist or school, or of a movement, period, or geographical region. Style is the cumulative result of many characteristics, including brushwork, use of tone and color, choice of different motifs, and the treatment of the subject. After the basic information about subject, composition, and mediums are conveyed, the verbal description can focus on how these many elements contribute to the whole. In a tour that includes several works of art, comparisons are an effective way of making stylistic features tangible.

### General to the Specific

- Clear and precise language is crucial to any good description. After the general idea of the work is conveyed, the description should be more vivid and particularized. Describe pertinent details, and focus on different parts of the work.

### Art Conventions

- Art terms and pictorial conventions such as perspective, focal point, picture plane, foreground, and background should always be defined for your audience. Typically, it is useful to introduce the definition or concept when the discussion turns to that aspect of the work of art.

For example: “The scene shows Christ and Peter placed in the centre foreground, with disciples and contemporary citizens arranged in rows on either side of them. Perugino directs the spectator to focus on the heart of the painting: the transferring of the keys. Perugino does this by exploiting the pictorial convention of one-point perspective. Let's recall the definition of one-point perspective, a way of projecting an illusion of the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional surface. All parallel lines appear to converge at a single point on the horizon, called the vanishing point. Jesus is presenting the large gold key to the kneeling Peter. In the space between the two figures, a silver key hangs from the same chain at the very center of the composition. The perspective lines of the pavement, comprising the brickwork design, lead the spectator's eyes into the distance, converging at the door of the centrally placed temple.”

-Fredericka Foster Shapiro, *Fifteenth-Century Italian Art*

### Indicate Where the Curators Have Installed a Work

- Generally, a work's placement in an institution reveals important information about its meaning, as well as its relationship to other works in the collection. Tell the AD user where the work is located in the institution. Include in your discussion a description of the gallery or sculpture garden where the work is installed, and mention the surrounding artworks. Describe how the work under discussion relates to these other works, as well as to the viewer and the surrounding space. For example, the work may confront the viewer or it may be installed off to the side.

### Refer to Other Senses as Analogues for Vision

Try to translate a visual experience into another sense. Other senses, such as touch or hearing, enable AD users to further construct highly detailed impressions of a work on display. For instance, refer to the sense of touch when describing the surface of a sculpture. A comparison between the rough-hewn texture of Auguste Rodin's *Balzac* (1892-97) and the glasslike finish of Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (c. 1927) can be very instructive. Or compare a Japanese tea-ceremony jar, with its irregular shape and unfinished surface, with a highly refined Chinese white-porcelain statuette from the eighteenth century. In both of these ceramic works, the degree of surface refinement is an integral part of the work's formal value, as well as of its meaning.

For example: The following passage draws upon the sense of hearing to experience the grandeur and sensual richness of Annibale Carracci's ceiling decoration (1597-1601) for the Palazzo Farnese, in Rome.

“Imagine being in a very large room with superb sound speakers placed just below the ceiling. The sound from the speakers is exactly what you might hear in a garden. Imagine hearing plants rustling in the wind, birds singing, and the splashing water of the fountains. In addition to these natural sounds, you hear snatches of conversations and the cheerful laughter of children playing. Imagine these sounds coming from many different directions.”  
-AEB and Paula Gerson with Virginia Hooper, *Baroque Art in the Seventeenth Century*

#### Explain Concepts with Analogies

- Certain kinds of visual phenomena, such as shadows or clouds, may be best described with a well-chosen analogy. To construct a helpful analogy, choose objects or experiences from everyone's common experience. In a description of Pablo Picasso's *Cubist painting Girl with a Mandolin (Fanny Tellier)* (1910), you might compare the image of the figure to a shattered wine bottle whose fragments have been reassembled in different positions.

#### Encourage Understanding through Reenactment

- Sometimes, it may be helpful to have the exhibit visitor *experience* the image, i.e., the AD user could mimic a depicted figure's pose. Since everyone is aware of his or her own body, this activity provides a concrete way of understanding difficult poses

depicted in a painting. Additionally, by assuming the pose, the AD user can directly perceive important formal characteristics of the work, such as symmetry or asymmetry; open or closed forms; implied action or repose; smooth, flowing lines or angular ones; and the degree of engagement with the viewer.

### Incorporate Sound in Creative Ways

- Sound can serve an interpretive and descriptive purpose, particularly as an auditory analogue for a work of visual art. A uniquely designed soundscape can evoke the experience of a display.

- Another way to use sound creatively is to provide on-site recordings of architectural spaces. For instance, a listener could hear the bustling sounds of St. Peter's piazza in Rome as he or she approaches its depiction.

### Allow People to Touch Works of Art or Artifacts

- Providing an opportunity to touch three-dimensional works gives visitors who are blind or visually impaired an immediate, personal experience with an original work of art. Direct touch is the best way to explore an object. For conservation reasons, however, some museums require people to wear thin gloves made of cotton or plastic. An informal poll at the Museum of Modern Art in New York indicated that most people prefer plastic gloves to cotton because the texture and temperature of the work's material can be felt.

### Alternative Touchable Materials

- When it is not possible to touch original works of art, alternative touchable materials can be provided. In some instances, alternative materials can provide a fuller and more complete understanding of a work because they can be touched without gloves. These auxiliary aids include three-dimensional reproductions; samples of art-making materials such as marble, bronze, clay, and canvas; examples of the tools used in various media, such as paintbrushes, chisels, and hammers; and replicas of the objects depicted in a display. Additionally, it is helpful to have a range of information available on the unique characteristics of the materials and the way in which the medium dictates the form.

### Tactile Illustrations of Artworks

- Most museum visitors want as much information as possible. Tactile diagrams or three-dimensional dioramas of a work of art are effective ways of making visual art accessible. Diagrams are tactile illustrations of artworks, and they are essentially relief images. They do not represent the actual object in every detail; they are intended to be used in conjunction with verbal descriptions.

## **Code of Professional Conduct for Audio Describers and Audio Description Trainers**

Although these principles focus on the responsibilities of audio describers, they apply equally to the conduct of audio description trainers.

1. Audio describers shall respect the privacy and confidentiality of the client (the entity engaging the services of the describer) and the individual(s) the client is serving (the consumer(s) of the audio description).

a. The audio describer's obligation is two-fold: to the organization engaging the services of the describer (client) and to the user(s) of the audio description (consumer(s)).

b. In some situations the audio describer may have direct contact with the consumer. In this case, the describer is placed in a confidential relationship with that individual and as such must maintain that individual's right to privacy and confidentiality.

(1) For example, in a theatre, the consumer who is blind may be on a date, with their family, or in any of a number of social situations. The describer should respect this and only initiate contact or conversation with the individual as necessary to ensure that the audio description services are delivered and received.

(2) For example, an organization engaging a describer may be doing so under a contract or grant, thus the describer would be violating the client's confidentiality if they were to discuss the work, whether or how much they are being paid, etc., outside of what is necessary to seek advice and counsel from a fellow describer.

2. Audio describers shall accept only those assignments for which they possess the requisite skills and knowledge.

a. There are many different media to which audio description may be applied and not every describer is trained or knowledgeable about description in all media.

(1) For example, an audio describer may be trained and have the requisite skills and knowledge to describe live theatre

performances but not dance, or opera, or film and video, or museums and exhibits.

3. Audio describers shall conduct themselves professionally and in a manner appropriate to the situation in which they are providing audio description.

a. Audio describers shall dress and behave in a manner that is appropriate to the specific environment in which they are providing audio description.

(1) For example, audio describers describing the audio/visuals at a business conference should dress and behave in a business-like manner. Audio describers who must climb a ladder to reach the audio description booth in a small live theatre should dress and behave accordingly.

b. Audio describers should avoid accepting assignments where the content to be described would make them uncomfortable. Before accepting any assignment, audio describers should try to ascertain whether it will place them in an uncomfortable situation and decline the assignment.

(1) For example, if an audio describer is asked to describe a program that contains nudity, sexual acts, violence, etc. and the describer feels this will make him/her uncomfortable, the describer should not accept this assignment. If the describer were to accept the assignment, s/he may fail to fulfil his/her obligation to the client and consumer(s) by editing or censoring things s/he is uncomfortable describing.

4. Audio describers shall demonstrate respect for the diversity of clients, consumers and colleagues.

5. Audio describers shall maintain ethical business practices.

a. Audio describers shall promptly notify clients should problems or conflicts arise with assignments they have accepted.

b. When paid for their services, audio describers shall charge appropriate fees and present professional invoices on a timely basis.

6. Audio describers shall take every opportunity to improve and develop their skill.

a. Audio describers shall attend workshops and conferences.

b. Audio describers shall mentor and be mentored by other audio describers.

c. Audio describers shall take every opportunity to listen to and experience other audio described activities.

## Annexe 5: Audio description guidelines for Greek - A working document

Drafted on 13th February 2008

By Yota Georgakopoulou

- ❖ In each scene describe:
  - ✓ When/Where: time of day (day/night? cloudy/dark) and location.  
eg. Time: morning, evening, midnight, afternoon, daybreak, [katamesimero], in 7[m].[m].
  - ✓ Locality: A [tetraorofi] block of flats, in the down floor, in the veranda.
  - ✓ Who: who is in the scene? Who comes in? Who leaves? What do they look like?
  - ✓ What: what actions are most important in understanding the programme?
- ❖ Who: Introduce the character by name only after they've been introduced by name in the dialogue.
  - ✓ Describe the sex (woman, man, child), their age (p.h. adolescent, [mesilikas], in 30, but don't use subjective terms, such as big, small), hair, build and clothing (p.h. [kokkinomalla], big, [koystoymarismenos]), relationship to other characters in the film, but only if this is known to the audience through the dialogue, race, but only if it's relevant to the plot and in this case all main characters' skin colours should be described (p.h. with [starenia] cuticle)
- ❖ Tenses
  - ✓ Use the simple present mainly and active voice instead of passive.
  - ✓ Use other tenses only to describe events that have happened or will happen in relation to the present filmic moment, e.g. because you will not have enough time to

describe them later on and their inclusion in the description is important to the understanding of the scene.

#### ❖ Syntax

- ✓ Avoid complex syntactic structures. Although Greek is known for the use of long sentences with many subordinate clauses, try to simplify syntax as much as possible, as in Greek subtitles. Avoid subordinate clauses and use main clauses most of the time. Use conjunctions (and, however, etc.) to link clauses.

#### ❖ Sound effects

- ✓ Don't describe sound effects. But you need to explain the sources of noises if they are not otherwise explainable from the original audio.
- ✓ And don't describe over sound effects either - make sure you describe around them, so they are included in the final version.

#### ❖ Vivid writing

- ✓ Use colours, numbers, directions (right, left), etc.
- ✓ Colours: they need to be included in the description, as most people with sight problems were not born blind, so even if they are blind now they will still have some memory of colours. Also, colours evoke connotations, so it's important that they are included. E.g. the fact that a woman is dressed in all black could signify that she is mourning if the location is Greece, etc.

#### ❖ 20 second rule

- ✓ Don't allow more than 20 seconds to go by without any audio description.

#### ❖ Vocabulary

- ✓ Be clear, concise and conversational. Vocabulary should be vivid, objective, grammatically and syntactically correct.
- ✓ Use daily terms. Not too many technical terms. If you use a technical term, describe it first.
- ✓ Use neutral speech. Do not use too much slang or jargon. The audio description text should not use language that attracts attention to itself. It does not matter if the dialogue uses marked language - the AD script

should not use the same marked language. E.g. do not use low register if that's the register used in the dialogue.

#### ❖ AVOID

- ✓ Verbs such as sees, observes, the scene changes, etc.
- ✓ Verbs or adverbs that describe emotions, such as “suspectly», «[neyriasmena]», «nervously». Instead, describe the physical manifestation of these emotions and let them speak for themselves: «it raises [[το]] brow his», «it tightens [[τις]] [grothies] her», «it plays with [[τα]] fingers her».
- ✓ Don' t infer or make assumptions
- ✓ Describe the facts and let them speak for themselves e.g. NO “dies”, BUT “his head falls to his behind and eyes close”.

#### ❖ Graphics

- ✓ Include all written graphics in the audio description text. Use quotes to type them, no need to type the word “sign», «plate» etc. E.g. “London 1986”.
- ✓ For text in subtitles, if it's confusing type the word “subtitle” before the subtitled text and then the text in quotes.
- ✓ For credits, list only the important ones, especially if they are too fact to read: production company/studio (Sony, Universal, etc.), title in quotes, main actors and the names of the characters they play, executive producers, director. At the end of program list the company providing the audio description (ECI). If the credits go over an important scene that needs to be described, then you may want to list them earlier on, so you have enough time to describe the scene.

#### ❖ SWIFT settings

- ✓ Word Rate  
Set the SWIFT word rate to 160 wpm and do not stray from that unless a crucial detail or graphic needs to be included. Read the description to yourself to make sure it fits in the time allotted and flows casually.
- ✓ Audio Cues

Usually consist of the last 3 words of dialogue before a description is read? Or a visual cue. Please use more than 3 words if that audio cue is not clear (Oh, uh, oh... is not a good cue... not really sure. Oh, uh, oh. Is better). Audio cues are upper case preceded by ellipses (...) and are timed exactly to the audio.

❖ Notes to Voice Talent

✓ Phonetic Pronunciation

Use phonetic spellings in brackets after a difficult name the first time it's pronounced -- no need to repeat throughout.

✓ Read Quickly/Talk Over

Occasionally, when a description must pass the 160pm word rate, you may want to put a note with the audio cue like this: [READ QUICKLY] All other notes to the voice talent should be set off by the word "note". [NOTE: CONFIRMED IT' S A LILAC]

✓ Sound Effects

When writing lengthy descriptions, include the sound effects as much as possible, set off by brackets -- and time these sounds to a reading of the description. E.g., He leaps over fallen tree. [BOOM] Another bomb goes off behind him.

✓ Pauses

when writing lengthy descriptions where not much is going on or there's room for dramatic pauses, you may include pauses for the reader in brackets. E.g. She lies on her bed staring at the ceiling. [: 02] Morning. She runs down the stairs to the kitchen.

# **Annexe 6: Ofcom Draft Guidelines from Television Access Services Review of the Code and Guidance 2006**

## **What is audio description?**

1.1 Audio description is a service primarily aimed at enhancing meaning and enjoyment of television services for blind or partially sighted viewers. It comprises a commentary woven around the soundtrack, exploiting pauses to explain on-screen action, describe characters, locations, costumes, body language and facial expressions.

## **Users**

1.2 While people with visual impairments are drawn from all age ranges, a majority will experience loss of some or all of their vision later in life, for example, as a result of Macular Degeneration. Accordingly, audio describers should take account of the fact that most potential users of audio description will have some sight, or will have had sight at some stage.

## **Selection and scheduling of programmes**

1.3 Although visually-impaired people like to watch the same sorts of programmes as everybody else, not all programmes lend themselves to audio description. Some programmes are too fast-moving, or offer little opportunity to insert audio description (e.g. news), or may not be significantly enhanced by the provision of audio description (e.g. quiz programmes).

## **Best practice**

1.4 What to describe: to the extent relevant to the storyline, audio description should describe characters, locations, time and circumstances, any sounds that are not readily identifiable, on-screen action, and on-screen information.

1.5 Characters: identifying and describing characters is vital to effective audio description. Key features (e.g. '*the tall man*', '*district attorney Lopez*') should be identified as soon as practicable, to help identify the person and avoid the need for long-winded and confusing descriptions. But do not give the name away if the plot

requires the character's identity to be revealed at a later date. When describing characters, aspects such as dress, physical characteristics, facial expression, body language, ethnicity and age may be significant. Don't shy away from using colours or describing a character as pretty, or handsome, where relevant to the story. Generally names (rather than 'he' or 'she') are used more often than in normal speech, so as to avoid confusing the audience, particularly when there are several people taking part in a dialogue.

1.6 On-screen action: wherever possible try to describe at the same time as the action occurs. This is particularly important with regard to comic situations, where the audience, sighted and visually impaired, should be able to laugh at the same time. Where relevant, key back-references can be included. It may be necessary to set up the next scene during the current description.

1.7 Settings: when describing locations, try to cover scene changes where possible; the locations (including scene changes wherever possible); the time of day/season/date setting where appropriate; on-screen action; any sounds that are not readily identifiable; and onscreen information (e.g. signs, hieroglyphics, open subtitles for foreign languages, captions, and opening and closing credits). The description should not censor what is on screen. However, it should not be necessary to use offensive language, unless (for example) when referring to content that is integral to understanding the programme, such as graffiti scrawled on a wall.

1.8 What not to describe: the description should only provide information about what can be seen on the screen. Information unavailable to the sighted viewer should not be added though discretion is always necessary. '*A turreted bridge over a city river*' would fall short if the sighted audience sees London's Tower Bridge, even without an identifying caption.

Generally, 'filmic' terms such as camera angles should not be used.

1.9 When to describe: audio description should not encroach on dialogue, important or complementary sound effects, or critical sound effects unless really necessary. Even then, audio description should only be used to impart relevant information when the dialogue or other sound is inconsequential or to read

subtitles or on-screen captions. To differentiate between subtitles and description the describer should do this by either the use of their voice (e.g. stating the obvious, '*He says in Russian...*' or '*A caption reads...*') or a second voice.

During opening titles and end credits, care should be taken to avoid clumsy overlaps with song lyrics. During songs, audio description should ideally take place where there is a reprise of the lyrics or where the lyrics are not relevant to the storyline.

1.10 Language: audio description provides a real-time commentary, so should generally be in the present tense (*he sits*), the continuous present (*he is sitting*) or the present participle ('*Standing at the window, he lets out a deep sigh*'), as appropriate. Variety is important, particularly with verbs. '*She scuttles into the room*' rather than the simple fact '*She enters the room*' creates a clearer image for the viewer (a thesaurus is always useful). Adverbs are useful shorthand to describing emotions and actions, but should not be subjective. Vocabulary should be matched to the genre of the programme, and should be accurate, easily understood, and succinct.

1.11 Delivery: delivery should be steady, unobtrusive and impersonal in style (but not monotonous), so that the personality and views of the describer do not colour the programme. Avoid the term 'we see'. However, it can be important to add emotion, excitement, lightness of touch at different points in different programmes to suit the mood and the plot development – the style should be matched to the genre of the programme. Diction should be clear, and not hurried – every word should be clear, audible and timed carefully so that it does not overrun subsequent dialogue. The aim should be to enhance the enjoyment of a programme not to distract from it.

1.12 Balance: judgement is needed in striking an appropriate balance between the amount of detail that is conveyed, and the risk of overburdening the audience with detail and detracting from the enjoyment of the programme. Too much description, even where there is a lot of space for description, can make it difficult for viewers to absorb information. The programme should be allowed 'to breathe'. On the other hand, long gaps in the dialogue may need to be explained if the viewer is not to be left confused, e.g. '*the cowboy rides across the prairie into the distance*'. If the 'space' for audio description is short, it is better to focus on key moments

and dynamics rather to rush the description or fill every available moment. For example, it may be distracting in dance or fight scenes to describe every piece of action. A consistent approach is important: if a description starts out as detailed, it should not suddenly become scant.

1.13 Describers: describers should be chosen to fit the genre, the nature of the programme and the intended audience. Ideally, the same people should be used to describe a series of programmes, both to ensure a consistent style (e.g. in terms of level of detail) and because the description forms a part of the programme for users.

1.14 Children's programmes: Language and pace of delivery for children's TV need particular care. A more intimate style may be appropriate than would be the case for programmes aimed at adults.