
Practice Report

Auteur Description: From the Director's Creative Vision to Audio Description

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Audio description (AD) is now the major technique for making films, theater performances, operas, and other events accessible to people who are blind or have low vision (Holland, 2009; Matamala & Orero, 2007; Orero, 2007). The provision of AD services is regulated in some countries, for example, in the United States by the Twenty-first Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 and in the European Union by Directive 2007/65/EC.

Using the gaps between dialogues, AD provides spectators who are visually impaired with information on who does what, where, and how (see Vercauteren, 2007). Traditionally, the who, what, where, and how of AD have largely depended on what audio describers deem to be most important. Following various AD guidelines, audio describers are supposed to describe what they see—and no more (see American Council of the Blind, 2009; Rai, Greening, & Leen, 2010).

“What you see is what you say (WYSIWYS)” is an injunction reiterated in many AD courses (see Snyder, 2008). As a consequence, AD relies heavily on the skills of a particular audio describer and his or her ability to translate the visual images into words adequately. However, as Udo and Fels (2009,

p. 179) noted, conventional AD “focuses on the description of what is seen—the set, actors’ movements and lighting—rather than on what is meant to be seen—the director’s vision.”

AUTEUR DESCRIPTION

In this report, I follow the suggestion that the film director’s creative vision should be incorporated into AD. I present a new type of AD for auteur and artistic films: auteur description, which incorporates the director’s creative vision in the AD script through the use of a screenplay (or other available materials, such as interviews and reviews) and thus gives the audio describer the artistic license to depart from the dictate of objectivism. The main function of auteur description is to immerse spectators who are blind or have low vision in the story world created by the film’s director.

The technique of auteur description was invented with artistic films in mind. In an auteur film, it is the director who is seen as the film’s major creative force. As Bordwell (1979, p. 59) noted, “the author becomes a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension.” The director of an auteur film leaves a recognizable imprint on all his or her films. Bordwell argued that “a small industry is devoted to informing viewers of such authorial marks. International film festivals, reviews and essays in the press, published scripts, film series, career retrospectives, and film education all introduce viewers to authorial codes” (p. 59). This report examines how such authorial codes can be rendered in auteur description by incorporating fragments of the published script.

Auteur description differs from conventional AD in the way the who, what, where, and how of the film are described. Departing from the notion of objective description, it eagerly embraces vivid and emotional language. Going beyond the WYSIWYS principle also means that the script can include additional information on the characters and their emotions, actions, and settings that are

This work was partially supported by research grant No. IP2010 040370 from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education for 2010–12. I owe a great debt of thanks to Wojciech Figiel and Piotr Wasylczyk for their critical comments on an early version of this report. Many thanks to John Kearns and Andrew Salter for their help with translating the Polish AD script into English for the purposes of this article.

not necessarily visible on the screen, but are important from the point of view of the director and, as such, are included in the screenplay. This technique is presented using the example of auteur description for the Spanish film *Volver* (2006), directed by Pedro Almodóvar, which had AD for Polish viewers.

The idea of incorporating the director's vision in the AD script is not new. It was previously explored by Fels, Udo, Ting, Diamond, and Diamond (2005) and Udo and Fels (2009), who stated that "it is important to respect the intentions and decisions made by the creative team to create a production that is true to the director's initial vision" (Udo & Fels, 2009, p. 182). Although it is much easier for audio describers to cooperate directly with directors from the same country, as was the case with Udo and Fels (2009), it is much more difficult with foreign films, especially those by world-famous directors. In consequence, other ways of adhering to the creators' vision need to be devised. One of them is resorting to the screenplay. Auteur AD, however, is not about simply copying the descriptions from the screenplay. The director's screenplay serves only as a reference and justification for creating credible AD in crucial scenes and, as such, should be used sparingly and be fully credited.

What follows is a presentation of auteur description of *Volver*, a Spanish-language production translated into Polish. I created the auteur description script on the basis of the original screenplay written by Pedro Almodóvar (2006) and published in Polish as a book. In this report, all quotations from the auteur description are indented.

Describing characters

In contrast to most conventionally described films, the auteur description of *Volver* opens with a short audio introduction, read over the opening credits, presenting the main character, Raimunda, played by Penélope Cruz, whose performance as Raimunda was widely

acclaimed by film critics, who praised her "lush sensuality" (Kinder, 2007, p. 9) and called her "absolutely spectacular" (Marcantonio, 2006, p. 79). In the screenplay, Almodóvar described her as follows:

Raimunda, of an astounding and racial beauty, is firmly grounded by her luscious rounded bottom and her bosom, which one can hardly take one's eyes off. Uncompromising, resolute, exuberant, courageous, and fragile at the same time.

This vivid description of both her looks and character traits was used in the AD script.

Another character who is introduced in the exposition phase of the film is Paco, Raimunda's husband, who "embodies all the worst features of machismo" (Marcantonio, 2006, p. 78). The first time Paco appears in the film he is "unshaved," "sprawled on the sofa," and is "watching a football game on TV while sipping on a beer." This description points to another difference between conventional AD and auteur description: While the former would use unmarked register and neutral vocabulary ("lying on the sofa, drinking some beer"), the latter consciously uses marked words ("sprawled on the sofa, sipping on a beer"), adding to the character's negative portrayal.

Volver abounds in colorful details that add flavor to the story. One of them is the character of Regina, Raimunda's Cuban neighbor, an illegal immigrant and a "hefty hooker" (Kinder, 2007, p. 7). The first time Regina appears in the film, she wears a miniskirt and a tacky low-cut, close-fitting, leopard-print blouse, exposing her ample bosom. While in conventional AD, released on DVD in the United Kingdom, it is only said: "A woman, Regina, stops nearby," the auteur description adds a comic touch to the character by humorously describing her clothes: "Regina, a plump Cuban neighbor, with clothes so tight one wonders how she can breathe, comes out."

Describing actions

The question of what the characters do is usually linked with who they are and how they do things. There is an important scene in the film, a harbinger of the disaster that is to occur, featuring Paco going to the bathroom while pulling his zipper down and taking a peek at Paula, Raimunda's daughter, through the door of her room, which is ajar. In the auteur description, this scene is described as follows:

Paco goes to the bathroom to take a piss. He is the kind of man that pulls the zipper down on his way to the bathroom, way before he gets there, as if to save some time. He walks by the half-opened door of Paula's tiny room. The girl, who is putting her pajamas on, is half naked. As if she could feel someone is watching her, she turns around and covers up.

By labeling Paco the "kind of man that pulls the zipper down on his way to the bathroom," auteur description not only presents the viewers with Almodóvar's vision of this character, but provides them with an important indicator of the looming tragedy. It also explicitly attributes intentions to some of the characters' actions, which gives the auteur description a more narratological—rather than merely descriptive—character (for more on the narratological approach to AD, see Kruger, 2010).

Describing places

Auteur description also differs from conventional AD in the presentation of settings. Raimunda and her family live in a working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of Madrid. This description is rendered in auteur description as "Evening. They get to the street where Raimunda lives. It seems as if the neighborhood and the city would end here." The same scene is described in conventional AD as "Nighttime. . . . The car pulls up outside an apartment building." In contrast to

conventional AD, the phrasing used in auteur description situates the action—both geographically and metaphorically—in the main character's world.

Describing emotions

One of the most controversial aspects of AD is how to describe emotions. AD standards recommend that audio describers do not spoon-feed information that can be inferred from dialogue to the audience who is visually impaired, but instead allow them to interpret characters' emotions themselves (American Council of the Blind, 2009; Szymańska & Strzymiński, 2010). Some facial expressions, however, may be quite difficult to label. Indicating in objective detail the exact movement of particular facial muscles may leave the audience puzzled as to what exactly is being shown. To some viewers, particularly those who are congenitally blind, the descriptions indicating someone raising his or her eyebrows or opening his or her mouth may not be directly understandable as an indication of surprise. In auteur description, emotions and facial expressions are often named explicitly: "Paula's eyes *glimmer with panic*"; "*feeling horny*, Paco kisses Raimunda"; "Raimunda steps back *in horror*"; "Raimunda, *seized with terror*, embraces Paula"; "Raimunda kneels down and turns the corpse around. She takes a look at his crotch. *Her facial expression tells us his penis must still be out.*"

Describing visual metaphors

Artistic cinema pays close attention to film language. There is one scene in *Volver* featuring "the exquisite shot of Raimunda sopping up Paco's bright red blood with lacy white paper towels" (Kinder, 2007, p. 7). In the scene, Raimunda takes out rolls of paper towels and places them directly on the pool of blood. Conventional AD describes the scene as follows: "Raimunda takes out two kitchen rolls from the cupboard. She places one paper towel over a pool of blood, which is slowly

sucked into the tissue.” In auteur description, an effort was made to render the visual quality of the image by metaphorically comparing the rolls of paper towels to embroidery. The visual effect of the shot was further intensified by the juxtaposition of contrasting colors of white paper, crimson blood, and dark embroidery:

Raimunda opens one of the top kitchen cupboards. She takes out a pack of four big kitchen-paper rolls. She opens one up, unrolls it, and starts cleaning the blood. The white paper soaks in crimson, forming a sort of dark embroidery.

Such visual effects are important for this film, as Bradshaw (2006) pointed out: “In its vividness and intense, almost neurotic sensitivity to color, particularly the color red, it [i.e., *Volver*] also looks like a Hitchcock thriller.”

CONCLUSION

In this report, a new type of AD—auteur description—has been advocated and exemplified as a solution to describe artistic films for people with visual impairments. The report presented here explored the plausibility of incorporating the director’s creative vision into the AD script by drawing on a screenplay. An important question that needs to be addressed is copyright; in this project, fragments of Almodóvar’s script were quoted in accordance with the fair-use principle and were fully credited. The use of the screenplay did not affect the duration of the process of writing the AD script.

The auteur description was tested among a convenience sample of viewers at an informal screening at the Polish Association of the Blind in Warsaw, where many people expressed their favorable opinions of auteur description, claiming that the juicy and vivid descriptions gave the film a more entertaining character and enabled them to gain a better understanding of the motivations of the characters and to follow the plot.

Further research on auteur description could address whether other films render themselves to this type of description and whether people who are blind or have low vision would like to see more films with such AD. Audio describers and providers of AD may consider using auteur description as an alternative to conventional description when providing AD for auteur cinema.

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