

The ethics of Audio Description: whose team are we on?

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Panel I4 – TV & ETHICS

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Abstract

Audio Description is the spoken description of key visual aspects on screen in the gaps between dialogue, primarily aimed at enabling consumers who are blind or have low vision to make sense of an audio-visual production. The field of Audio Description is relatively unstudied in screenwriting literature. In order to push boundaries, we first need to understand and articulate them; and furthermore, do so in a way that is anchored to the ongoing requirement of the describer to expand accessibility for those who utilise different or reduced signifiers in consuming audio-visual material.

This paper poses questions around the role and ethics of the audio describer. The received wisdom given to all describers throughout their training is that a describer should 'say what they see' to facilitate a consumer who is (for example) blind or has low vision to follow the audio-visual presentation alongside their sighted peers. However, as a practitioner, this directive over-simplifies the ethical, even ontological dilemma audio description encompasses. As a craft, it hovers between a post-production script process and a translation/adaptation model, with describers making their own decisions (consciously or unconsciously) about where on the spectrum they position themselves, either holistically or on a 'programme-by-programme' (or even 'description-by-description') basis.

If audio describers are considered as another kind of screenwriter, how does their work relate to screenwriters understood as authors of the screenplay (and is the screenplay the 'best' audio description of the work)? As part of a broader attempt to understand how to develop an ethical, artistic and, most importantly, valuable and valued service, this paper will explore how the self-positioning of a describer (as part of the creative production team, or as an audience-based 'whisperer in the dark') impacts on the way films, television programmes and other audio-visual outputs are perceived. It will also examine the different experiences and potential outcomes of creating the audio description script both with and without access to a screenplay (in whatever iteration) and explore what collaborations could be imagined between the writers of screenplays and the writers of audio description.

Keywords – Audio Description, ethics, access, script

Polly Goodwin (Audio Describer, Melbourne, Australia) Having studied Musicology (Masters) at the University of Oxford, my career has been devoted to widening access for people who are blind or have low vision. I worked for 8 years supporting a member of the British Parliament, who happened to be blind, and am currently Service Designer for Education at Vision Australia. I qualified in 'Audio Description for Screen' at City University, London in 2010 and now practice as a highly experienced professional freelance audio describer, working across the genres for a variety of clients and audiences internationally. My passion for silent film is just one lens through which I have explored the potential of audio description via self-directed study, and the challenge of translating the grammar and style of communication utilised in film and television. My current research is groundwork for a practical study into expanding the reach, role and meaning of audio description in a manner that as ethical, artistic, valuable and valued service.

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