

## Audio Description Described: Current Standards, Future Innovations, Larger Implications

IN APRIL 2015, NETFLIX, THE video rental and online streaming service, announced that its new series *Daredevil* would be available with audio description for the blind and visually impaired. The company also announced that soon it would increase the availability of audio description for all its in-house productions. This step may have been taken in response to protests from disability activists who remarked on the irony that *Daredevil*, whose title character is a blind superhero, would not be completely accessible to blind viewers. It may also have been a preemptive effort to avoid a lawsuit. In 2012, the National Association of the Deaf won a settlement against Netflix that compelled the service to provide closed captioning for all its on-demand programming. Additionally, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has set mandates compelling television broadcasters to increase the number of programs available with audio description and requiring all movie theaters with digital projectors to offer audio description devices to patrons who request them. What all this means for blind people is that there will be a proliferation of accessible movies and television programs. As accessible offerings proliferate, it seems an apt moment to review the history of audio description and scrutinize current standards and practices.

“Audio description” is the umbrella term for techniques meant to make visual media accessible to blind people. These services have been around since approximately the 1980s, when they first began to be offered in live theater performance. The blind audience wore headsets provided by the theater, and a describer was positioned backstage or in the sound booth, from where he or she broadcast brief descriptions about the actors’ movements, gestures, facial expressions, and costumes during the natural pauses between the characters’ speeches. Sometimes more detailed description of

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ABSTRACT Audio description seeks to make visual media—film, television, theater, art exhibits—accessible to blind people. In this essay I use the audio-described version of the Oscar-nominated film *The Sessions* as an example of the current standards. I then speculate on future innovations that could democratize the medium and make it more inclusive. REPRESENTATIONS 135. Summer 2016 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 89–101. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2016.135.6.89.

the set and a reading of the program were offered before the performance or during intermission. Then, as now, the service is typically offered for only certain performances of the show, and patrons are required to sign up in advance. At approximately the same time that audio description began to be offered in the theater, the service began to be available for television programs and movies. In these cases the description was recorded on a separate audio track accessible to the moviegoer through a headset provided by the theater, or via a setting on the television, and then later by selecting the described version on a home videotape or DVD. At the same time, museums began to offer docent-led tours for blind people and special taped tours or additional tracks on audio tours used by sighted visitors. Over the years, the services have expanded, and the practices have become standardized. While it's understandable that a certain level of consistency and professionalism is necessary, the rules and guidelines that have become codified seem to arise from problematic assumptions about what blind people can understand and should know about visual phenomena.

Until recently, the standards for audio description have received very little scholarly scrutiny. Literature on the topic is typically written for practitioners and usually only suggests minor tweaks to standard practices or summarizes the results of focus-group surveys of consumers. Some researchers employ the techniques of narrative theory or discourse analysis to collect data from existing audio-description scripts or to tout the advantage of this kind of analysis without necessarily demonstrating how it will produce better results.<sup>1</sup> One research study used eye-tracking technology on a group of sighted participants watching short excerpts of a film, then used the data to write a descriptive track and compared it to an existing audio description of the same film. Blind participants were then asked to evaluate the merits of the two descriptions. Even the researchers admitted that their findings were inconclusive, and that the expense of the technology makes further research of this kind impractical.<sup>2</sup> In disability studies scholarship, when audio description comes up, it typically appears in lists of necessary accommodations to promote the goal of social inclusion for people with disabilities, along with closed captioning, sign-language interpretation, architectural modifications, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> Scholars advocate for audio description in specific situations, in public service announcements for emergency preparedness, for example.<sup>4</sup> But for the most part, in this scholarship, as in the literature for producers, there is a kind of tacit acceptance that the foundational assumptions behind the practice are sound and unproblematic.<sup>5</sup>

What I have at stake here is that I am blind myself, and so a potential consumer of audio description services. As will become apparent, I am skeptical about, even hostile to, the current practices. My critique of the standard practices, however, is blunted by the undeniable fact that I cannot

see what I'm missing. So, whenever possible, I try to draw the attention of scholars of literature and visual culture to audio description, in the hope that the perspective of someone who is neither a service provider nor a consumer could eventually lead to innovation. The increased availability of audio description, such as that provided on Netflix offerings, could mean that sighted people might happen upon it and discover some utility beyond what was originally intended. In other words, I resort to a familiar tactic of disability rights discourse and draw an analogy between this relatively new disability accommodation and the most familiar one—the wheelchair ramp. The analogy runs that while a wheelchair ramp, which was originally intended to provide access to people using wheelchairs and other mobility devices, can now be understood to serve anyone, disabled or not, who uses a conveyance on wheels, such as a baby stroller, wheeled suitcase, or skateboard. Thus, my goal here is not merely to critique the current practices of audio description but also to speculate on how it might expand beyond a segregated accommodation to create a more inclusive culture.

As a case in point I will focus on the audio-described version of the 2012 Oscar-nominated film *The Sessions*, written and directed by Ben Lewin, based on autobiographical writing by Mark O'Brien, the poet and journalist who became paralyzed from the neck down as a child and spent the rest of his life dependent on an iron lung respirator. The plot of the film centers on his account of losing his virginity at age 38 when he decided to employ a sexual surrogate. Specifically, I want to describe a screening I attended at UC Berkeley during a disability awareness event organized by the Disabled Students' Union on campus. They were interested in promoting conversation about disability and sexuality. But also, as an awareness-raising exercise, they chose to screen the film with the captions and the audio description turned on for everyone in the audience to experience, nondisabled and disabled alike. As a way to increase the audience for this event, I made it an assignment for a class I was teaching that my students attend and write up a brief account.

My mission here is not to critique the specific example of the audio description of this film. That is to say, the description in this instance is no better or worse than in other examples I might have chosen. The audio description of this film was produced by WGBH in Boston, one of the premier services in the country, and so can be said to represent the industry standard. This occasion gave me a rare opportunity to compare my own observations with those of my students, who in this instance were all sighted, and thus allows me to bring some problematic aspects of standard practices to the fore. More significantly, the observations of my students suggest other applications and other audiences for audio description and prompt me to speculate on future innovations that could improve the medium.

Before I get to *The Sessions*, I should say something about my experience of visual media. I am old enough that my viewing practices predate the advent of audio description. Like many blind people in the industrialized world, I go to the cinema, screen films at home, and listen to television programs. And like most moviegoers, I almost always know something about a movie in advance, either from reading reviews, hearing a preview or advertisement, or talking about it with friends. This anticipatory description typically gives me at least a general outline of the plot. For the most part, I can usually follow the action from dialogue and sound effects and only rarely require some additional information from a viewing companion. For me, less is more. Usually the only thing I ask when I'm in the cinema is to have signs, letters, or any other text that is shown on the screen read aloud to me. If a character says, "Stop waving that in my face," I might ask, "What is he waving in her face?" though this may be obvious from context. The most frequent question I ask is, "Why is that funny?" This comes up when the humor turns on some sight gag or visible element. Sometimes I am content with what I call retrospective description. In the inevitable conversation that follows going to a movie with a friend, I may ask about some detail that did not make sense. But often this is part of a give-and-take conversation, where I am as likely to remark on some feature of the sound track, or subtlety in an actor's vocal performance, as to need visual details explained. So, generally speaking, I don't require much in the way of audio description and rarely choose it when it's an option on a DVD I might be screening at home.

But while my preference would be for less rather than more detailed description, other listeners might have other preferences. The blind and visually impaired audience served by audio description is diverse, including people born with absolutely no visual experience and those who have lost some degree of vision late in life. Audio description must take all this diversity into account. And in the case of a movie, the description needs to be scripted and timed to fit in the silences between lines of dialogue and other aspects of the sound track.

One of the main imperatives of the standard practices for audio description is that the content must be neutral and objective. For example, in an instructional YouTube video, Rick Boggs, founder and manager of Audio Eyes, another leading producer of audio description, lists ten principles, the first of which is "describe what you see."<sup>6</sup> Other guidelines advise the describer to answer the journalist's classic who-what-when-where questions and refrain from imposing any evaluation or interpretation: "Describe objectively without personal interpretation, censorship, or comment. Descriptive adjectives are important in enhancing a scene, but must not reflect personal view."<sup>7</sup> In a sense, audio description might seem to promote a form of surface reading where the emphasis is on what's manifest rather

than what's latent in the image. But while a film scholar could spend paragraphs describing a single shot, since audio description requires that description be delivered between lines of dialogue and other elements of the sound track, describers are often limited to just a few words. Moreover, in extreme instances, the imperative to refrain from interpretation means that a character will be described as turning up the corners of her mouth rather than smiling. Guidelines also dictate that the describer should avoid any technical cinematic vocabulary, even terms that are in common parlance:

Generally it is appropriate to avoid filmmaking jargon and reference to filmmaking techniques—e.g., “close-up” or “fade to black.” Most film or television is naturalistic; that is, the intent of the creator is to have the audience engage in the willing suspension of disbelief. Just as with live theater, the area surrounded by the proscenium (the film or television screen) is considered the “fourth wall” of the area in which actors are playing. This technique helps consumers feel as though the action is “real.” As noted earlier, when a describer calls attention to the artifice of filmmaking, he or she “breaks the fourth wall.”<sup>8</sup>

Leaving aside the generalization about the naturalism of most films and television programs, the guidelines promote an image of blind people as less interested in or even aware of the artifice of film. The rules seem based on an assumption that a film is mostly a matter of narrative, where plot elements supersede anything to do with a filmmaker's particular visual aesthetic.

The insistence on objective neutrality seems to come from an assessment that sighted viewers enjoy an autonomous, unmediated experience of visual media, which is more or less the same from viewer to viewer. Therefore, if the describer simply chooses the correct words, an image will be transmitted directly to the blind person's “mind's eye,” where she can then form an independent, aesthetic judgment about it. Speaking for myself, I am not sure that I have a mind's eye, or if I do, its vision is impaired precisely to the same degree as my physical eyes. I am not particularly adept at forming mental images to illustrate words I hear or read. Part of my objection to the term “mind's eye” is semantic. Like other scholars of representations of blindness in literature and culture, I have noted the many instances of figurative language that equate blindness with ignorance, prejudice, and obliviousness.<sup>9</sup> I also note the prevalence of metaphors equating sight and vision to intelligence, with wisdom and prescience as the flipside of the same problem.<sup>10</sup> When cognitive functions are linked to the eyes in this way, it denigrates other ways of knowing. When people talk about a blind person's mind's eye, more often than not it seems to me a misguided attempt to make the blind person feel better for her or his lost vision: “You may be blind but you still have an imagination, just like a normal person.” This is my personal observation; sensitivity to “vision equals intelligence” and other metaphors of

sight and blindness, and the way those tropes represent mental processes, may differ for other blind people.

Without digressing into a lengthy discussion of the cognitive processes linking words to images, I still have to quibble with the notion that absolute objectivity is possible or even desirable. Language inevitably comes with connotations and associations that differ from speaker to speaker. The fact that audio description is unattributable to a single author contributes to the question of objectivity: sometimes the person speaking the description actually wrote it; sometimes the text was a collaboration or authored by another individual or team. So while a scholarly treatment of a text, painting, or film may be scrupulous in sticking to a neutral description, the reader can ascribe the particular word choices to the subjectivity of the author. With audio description, the illusion of objectivity is reinforced because the description is delivered without authorship, as if it represents some unassailable truth.

The rule about objectivity even affects the vocal performance of the describers. There is a certain tone of voice that all the professional describers tend to assume. The tone is at once neutral and perky. The voices are calm, controlled, but also cheerful. The vocal performance evokes the sense of a viewing companion who is there to offer commentary without judgment, to participate in the viewing experience without being affected by it. Sometimes this is radically at odds with the content of the film. The neutral cheerfulness is the same whether the action on-screen shows a violent murder, a thrilling car chase, or a steamy love scene.

Guidelines are not specific about matching the describer's voice to the content of the film in terms of gender, age, or regional accent. In the case of *The Sessions*, the describer is female. The choice has practical benefits, since the film opens with several instances of voiceover from Mark O'Brien's perspective. We hear his voice, but the female describer announces that his lips are not moving. If the describer were male, identifying one disembodied voice from another might have been more difficult.

Since I've never screened *The Sessions* without the description on, it's impossible to know what I would have missed or misunderstood without it. But the first thing I was aware of was how the whole movie is about description. In all the sex scenes, the sex surrogate, Cheryl, played by Helen Hunt, describes what she's doing while she's doing it. Mark O'Brien, played by John Hawkes, later describes what happened in the sessions to his priest, Father Brendan, played by William H. Macy. In other scenes, Cheryl tape-records reports of the sessions using more clinical language. Even Mark's assistant, Vera, played by Moon Bloodgood, describes what's supposed to be going on between Mark and Cheryl as she waits in another room. So in my experience of the film, the audio description became just another layer of anticipatory or retrospective description of the action.

Given the fact that the dialogue is already describing the main physical action, a good deal of the descriptive track focuses on subtler aspects of body language and facial expressions. Since he is playing a character who could not move his body below his neck, John Hawkes does a lot of acting with his face. There are many references to eye, eyebrow, and mouth movements. In fact, all the characters' facial expressions are highlighted. The most elaborate gesture described is the priest's shrug. The priest shrugs in every scene. Although he tells O'Brien that he thinks God will give him a free pass for his sessions with the sex surrogate, the priest still finds the arrangement challenging to church orthodoxy and to his own beliefs, so the shrug seems an apt gesture to convey all this. But it is mentioned so often that it begins to sound like he must have some sort of uncontrolled physical tic. I'm not sure this would have been as noticeable to a viewer not hearing these subtle body movements identified each time as shrugs.

There is very little reference to costumes. Though the film is set in the 1980s, apparently the costumes are similar enough to contemporary styles so as not to merit mention. There are, however, two scenes when Mark and one of his assistants go shopping for shirts. In one instance, he selects a shirt described as a dark paisley button-up. The student sitting next to me felt compelled to enhance this description by saying, "and it's really ugly." Later, during the session with Cheryl, she comments on the shirt, prompting Mark to ask, "Is it racy and sophisticated?" and she replies, "You took the words out of my mouth." The intent of the shirt-buying scenes is clear; Mark's growing interest in Cheryl makes him more conscious of his appearance and more inclined to take care about his sartorial choices. But the failure of the describer to make an aesthetic judgment about the paisley shirt made it hard to assess the characters' banter about it.

Since standard convention disapproves of cinematic terminology, the temporal movement from scene to scene is indicated with the word "now." When the scene cuts from one of the sessions to a later scene between O'Brien and the priest, or to a simultaneous scene between Vera and the motel clerk, the description announces the time or space switch with "now in the church" or "now in the motel lobby." Then, when there's a cut back to the main action of the session, the describer says, "back in the motel room." Since the characters' reactions to each other during the actual scenes are muted or not articulated, these movements to later instances where they are able to relive and narrate the events provide a kind of retrospective revelation of motivation and interiority. But the repetition of the word "now" is potentially confusing, unless it is understood as referring to the temporality of the viewer. In effect it's saying, "Now we are looking at X," rather than attempting to define the different time frames of the characters' experience.

Under the neutrality imperative, audio description often withholds information in a way that can draw undue attention to the absent information. For instance, Mark's respirator tube, which he uses during the day when he is out of the iron lung and moving from place to place on a wheeled gurney, is first referred to as a "white plastic tube," and then just as a tube. It is not until after the scene when Mark explains his iron lung to Cheryl that the tube becomes the respirator tube. I understand the logic. To call it a respirator tube would be an interpretation, supplying information that a sighted viewer might not possess. From the responses of my students, I know that there are viewers who might not be able to surmise the function of this bit of plastic. But for me, this withheld information made me question my initial surmise in a way that was potentially distracting.

There's an even more significant bit of withheld information about Vera's race. When first introduced, she's described as "a young woman with glasses, her hair in a braided ponytail"; there is no mention of the hair color or anything else about her appearance. By contrast, Cheryl is initially described as "a middle-aged blond," and Amanda, another of Mark's assistants, is described as "a raven-haired young woman." Then, in a scene when Mark asks Vera about her first sexual experience, he goes on to ask, "Was he a Chinese boy?" She explains that she always dated white boys in high school to annoy her parents. This prompted a laugh and I had to ask the student sitting next to me to explain that Vera appears to be Chinese American. Audio description guidelines about racial or ethnic characteristics have evolved over the years. It used to be that race was never mentioned, but current standards recommend including this information:

Identify ethnicity/race as it is known and vital to the comprehension of content. If it is, then all main characters' skin colors 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.)<sup>11</sup>

In the case of *The Sessions*, the audio description is caught between the two practices. I'm told that there are several characters who could be described as African American, but this information is apparently deemed irrelevant to the plot, even though for sighted viewers it may well play a role. And while Vera's race is not mentioned at her first appearance, later, when the motel clerk, with whom Vera has a mild flirtation, is introduced, he is described as "an Asian male clerk." I'm left to wonder over the politics of these choices. Is it that once Vera's race is made a topic of conversation between the characters, then it is acceptable to mention the race of the new character with whom she is thrown together?

But the most significant bit of withheld information involves Helen Hunt's nude body. In the sex scenes, Cheryl disrobes, and there are numerous full



frontal shots of Hunt's naked body. Though the descriptive track narrates the removal of her garments, and the various positions she takes in bed, there is no description of her naked body. In fact, from the descriptive track it would be possible to surmise that these scenes are shot in such a way that the viewer cannot see her breasts and genitals. In reviews of the film and interviews with Hunt, much is made of the nude scenes. Hunt was praised for her courage in baring her forty-nine-year-old body. And I have to assume that her nudity and her age have an impact on viewers who are mostly accustomed to seeing only young nude bodies on-screen. This points to what seems to me a somewhat misguided attempt on the part of the descriptive service to leave something to the blind viewer's imagination that is explicit to the sighted viewer. This modesty felt unduly paternalistic to me, as if I needed protection from this central element of the film's content. It also led me to wonder whether this aspect of the film prompted the choice of the female describer. Is it based on the heteronormative assumption that a female viewer would be less likely to be aroused by a nude female body, making the female voice seem more detached and objective?

It's not that I wanted a lurid or detailed assessment of Hunt's physique, but I wanted to understand its effect on viewers. I questioned my students about Hunt's body and received giggling and stony silence. Undeterred, I threw them a few adjectives, asking for a simple "agree" or "disagree" answer. Since she was initially described as a middle-aged blond, and she is the mother of a teenaged son, I asked, "Is she well-preserved?" A female student told me, "Better than that." But that was all I could get out of them. I consulted with a friend of mine, who I guess could be described as a middle-aged woman, though not a blond. She said Hunt has "a Hollywood body" and went on to elaborate that her body is symmetrically proportioned, with nothing sagging, no stretch marks, no unusual scars or birthmarks—in other words, an idealized version of a woman's body. I asked if there was any evidence of surgical enhancement, but she could not say.

While my students were reluctant to comment on the effect of Hunt's nudity, they were struck by how much else was left out of the audio description. They listed numerous visual details they thought should have been mentioned. Some complained about the absence of cinematic terminology. But despite these flaws, I was surprised by the many students who responded favorably, saying that the description fit so well with the plot of the movie that they couldn't imagine the movie without it. Several made the point that I made earlier about how the description drew their attention to the temporal and spatial shifts between scenes and highlighted the retrospective content of the narrative. Several also made the wheelchair-ramp analogy, imagining that audio description might be a useful enhancement for anyone, providing greater insights into the characters' motives and the actors'

craft. One student went on to describe his own movie-viewing practices and to imagine audio description as a useful tool. The student pointed out that he, like most of his peers, seldom watches movies in the cinema anymore, but more often views them at home on one screen while simultaneously doing something else on another, and so he imagined that the audio description could allow him to multitask more efficiently. His ears would be primed to listen for certain key words to alert him to lift his eyes from his video game or Facebook page, to watch a scene of interest in the film. In this case, I assume he would be attending to any mention of body parts, nakedness, and so forth.

But the possibility that sighted people might consider audio description as a useful tool or enhancement of their own viewing experience gives me hope. Another cause for optimism comes from filmmakers themselves. At the 2013 Edinburgh Film Festival, I spoke on a panel where the organizers took the novel approach of pairing sensory access, such as audio description and captioning, with linguistic access—dubbing and subtitling. The audience was made up of independent filmmakers primarily from non-English-speaking countries. It was imperative for them to improve linguistic access as a way to enlarge the audiences for their films. This made them unusually receptive to ideas about audio description as another facet of this goal. My copanelist and I urged them to think about access from the outset of their projects rather than later, as something added on in post-production by professional agencies who might have little awareness of the filmmakers' goals or intentions. One person suggested assigning someone to be the "access producer" in charge of these matters. As another facet of the wheelchair-ramp analogy reveals, access works better and is more aesthetic if it is part of the original design rather than bolted on later.

An even more encouraging development comes from a more mainstream source. In December 2015, Pixar Animation Studios launched an initiative to produce in-house audio description for their films rather than delegating it to one of the external service providers. As part of this initiative, Pixar is working with Disney to develop a smartphone application that would allow blind users to access the audio description directly from the phone. This would eliminate the problem that many blind moviegoers experience when the device the theater is supposed to provide doesn't function correctly. And since the phone app is available to anyone with a smartphone, there's a possibility that any user, blind or not, could turn on the audio description to enhance their own viewing of the film. This in turn opens up the possibility that the filmmakers might deliberately use audio description as a narrative feature of the film.

How might such a narrative device work? A friend told me about an experience her elderly father had had with the audio description on a DVD

he watched at home. He had inadvertently turned on the audio description, and did not realize that it was intended for blind viewers. When she asked him how he liked the film, he responded that initially it had seemed a fairly conventional narrative, but then, he noted, there was commentary delivered by a disembodied voice, not associated with any character. He described this as a very modern device, something new that he'd never encountered before. At first he was perplexed, but eventually he began to interpret this track as a sort of free-floating omniscient narrative voice, noting facial expressions and gestures in such a way as to draw his attention to them and thus compel an additional layer of interpretation.

Of course, this is an example of an accidental misuse of audio description, but it suggests that audio description might appeal to people who are not blind. Audio description is sometimes touted as a useful option for sighted people wishing to listen to a film or TV program “eyes-free” while driving, for instance.<sup>12</sup> It is also beginning to find application in educational arenas, for English language learners and students with learning disabilities besides visual impairment, for example. As users diversify, it can be hoped that demand for improvement and innovation will change the medium.

In 2013 the Video Description Research and Development Center of the Smith Kettlewell Institute in San Francisco launched YouDescribe.org, an experimental platform where nonprofessionals can add audio description to YouTube videos. Joshua Miele, the director of the project, is blind himself and so all too aware of the shortcomings of the current standards. Initially, the project envisaged primarily pedagogical applications. A video assigned for a middle or high school science class could be described by a blind student's teacher, parent, or friend and then made available to other blind students across the country. But beyond this educational context, the idea is that anyone can supply information about visual material that will be useful to people who can't see it, and if the volunteer describers are unfettered by the professional standards, and in more direct consultation with blind people, they will innovate new techniques. For instance, they could experiment with different vocal performance styles, or pitch the description more directly to a specific age group. Among other features, the site allows for the possibility that there will be multiple descriptions of the same material, allowing a user to choose the one most in line with her own taste, or else to build up understanding through hearing multiple subjective interpretations. A user can select a favorite describer's profile, and access all the videos that person has described. Eventually it may be possible to request a favorite describer for a particular video. The technology also allows describers to add in-line description during pauses in speech, as in the professional manner, or to pause the video for lengthier description. Ultimately it may be possible for describers to add different levels of description, and users could choose

whether or not to access it. These experiments in audio description have direct implications for such new developments as the Disney smartphone app, allowing users to customize their viewing and listening experience. Additional content could be accessed before or after the screening of the film, so that users could enhance the experience with anticipatory or retrospective description.

Whether or not experiments such as YouDescribe will have an impact on the professional services remains to be seen. Joel Snyder, who literally wrote the book on audio description, expresses defensiveness and a certain condescension: “This crowdsourcing idea—‘Y’all come [try it], you don’t need to know how’—that’s just crap. . . . Josh might say, ‘Well, crap’s OK!’ and God bless him, but being blind doesn’t make you an expert in audio description.”<sup>13</sup>

In Snyder’s comment I hear a tone familiar from decades of encounters with professionals in special education and rehabilitation, who are benign as long as their methods and assumptions are unquestioningly appreciated, but become hostile when a recipient of their services critiques, complains, or suggests another way. For my part, I recognize that crowdsourcing has its pitfalls: for instance, people might add ironic description, deliberately misrepresenting or exaggerating what’s going on for the amusement of sighted viewers, and thus destroying the description’s utility for blind audiences. Nevertheless, new voices and new eyes have something to contribute. I have devised writing exercises using YouDescribe to develop students’ critical thinking and interpretive skills.<sup>14</sup> My goal is not to inspire them to seek careers in audio description. It is not currently a particularly lucrative or stable profession, though if demand increases, this might change. Still, many of my students enjoy the exercise and have taken up YouDescribe as a kind of hobby. Beyond these experiments, I imagine a future where filmmakers, screenwriters, and actors collaborate on an audio description track that is more in keeping with the film’s aesthetics, and film scholars and critics contribute descriptive commentary that enriches anyone’s viewing experience. In other words, I hope that audio description can be elevated from its current status as a segregated accommodation outside the general public’s awareness and launched into the new media—a literary/interpretive form with infinite possibilities.

## Notes

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2. Elena Di Giovanni, “Visual and Narrative Priorities of the Blind and Non-blind: Eye Tracking and Audio Description,” *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 22, no. 1 (2014): 136–53.
  3. For example, see Julia Hoffmann and Aliaa Dakroury, “Disability Rights Between Legal Discourses and Policy Narratives: An Analysis of the European and Canadian Frameworks,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2013), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1778/3260>.
  4. Elaine Gerber, “Describing Tragedy: The Information Access Needs of Blind People in Emergency-related Circumstances,” *Human Organization* 68, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 73–81.
  5. An exception to this generalization is this description of an arts residency program held at UC Irvine in 2012, where scholars and artists came together to sketch art projects with access features such as audio description incorporated into the design from the outset: Catherine J. Kudlick and Susan Schweik, “Collision and Collusion: Artists, Academics, and Activists in Dialogue with the University of California and Critical Disability Studies,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2014), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4251/3609>.
  6. Rick Boggs, “How to Know What to Say,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZlNVajYx9s>.
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  8. Joel Snyder, *The Visual Made Verbal: A Comprehensive Training Manual and Guide to the History and Applications of Audio Description* (Indianapolis, 2014), 60.
  9. For example, David Bolt, *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-Reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Literature* (Ann Arbor, 2014).
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  14. Georgina Kleege and Scott Wallin, “Audio Description as a Pedagogical Tool,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2015), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4622/3945>.