

Narration or description: What should audio description “look” like?

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ABSTRACT

Like the various forms of audiovisual translation (AVT), ‘audio films’ are a hybrid, consisting of both the original film and an audio description (AD) inserted into it as a voice-over that provides the listener with a substitute for the visual content. According to the German guidelines, AD should be objective in order not to compromise the original work. This raises two questions: firstly, is it appropriate for the AD to be descriptive if one assumes that a feature film has a narrative structure, which is primarily represented on the level of images? And secondly, if the aesthetics of the film are essentially a function of its visual content, how can objectivity be reconciled with the stylistic and aesthetic objectives of the movie? This analysis is a contribution to the question of how sound and visual information of a feature film interact to tell a story and, as a consequence, what audio description should ‘look’ like in order to respect both the function of the original and the needs of the target audience.

Describing and telling are two basic modes of representation in narrative texts, including orally presented texts in audio-visual media. But only telling is constitutive for narratives. Nevertheless, describing and telling are interdependent, as Genette argues (1981: 162f), so it may be surprising that the describing mode is rejected by some theorists. One such critic is Lukács, who discussed these two modes in his 1936 essay *Describing or telling*. Lukács, however, distinguishes between descriptions connected to the characters and the action, and descriptions whose function is reduced to a simple *effet de réel*, as Roland Barthes called it. To keep in mind this distinction seems very useful to me, also as regards audio description.

Analysing the function of description in a narrative is an important first step in the creation of audio descriptions – at least if the film being described is a feature film. As the term suggests, the goal of audio description is to furnish orally presented verbal descriptions as a substitute for the visual level of the film. Together with the soundtrack of the original, audio description provides an audio version of the original movie. It should aim at achieving dynamic equivalence with the original, as other kinds of audiovisual translations do. One of the crucial problems of audio description is the lack of time, as it has to fit in the pauses between the pieces of dialogue in the original film, like marquetry. Another problem is the series of stylistic restrictions set by the guidelines of Dosch and Benecke (1997), according to which the describer should choose brief and simple sentences. This shows once more the importance of analysing which elements of the picture are relevant and need to be described. Important criteria for deciding this are – in my view – on the one hand, the question of the interaction between the elements of the picture and the soundtrack, and, on the other, that of their function for the whole narrative. It is thus important to remember Umberto Eco's distinction between the cinematographic and the filmic code. While the cinematographic code simply codifies effects of reality produced by technical devices – such as the camera – the filmic code deals with the communication of narrative messages (Eco 1985: 250). In other words, in a feature film we are not confronted with effects of reality, but with narrative functions.

In his analysis of film dialogue, Francis Vanoye (1985: 99-118) distinguishes between two functions: a horizontal and a vertical one – or let's say a function addressing the audience, piercing the fourth wall – a distinction also adopted by Aline Remael (2008: 60). This distinction corresponds to the difference between the mimetic and narrative functions of the filmic elements, and of course, both can be fulfilled by the same element. I would like to adopt this distinction and apply it also to the visual elements of the film, adding an aesthetic and an entertaining function to the vertical ones.

In the following paragraphs I will consider the question of how audio description deals with elements of the visual (or iconic) code that have a double function – a horizontal and a vertical one – and how it copes with such ambivalence. I will use an example to illustrate the limits reached by audio

description when it has to “translate” an iconic code into a linguistic code, and what kind of stylistic means could be used in order to reach the greatest possible equivalence with the original.

The example I have chosen for this purpose is *Yella*, directed by Christian Petzold in 2007 (Germany). The narratological concept of unreliable narration can be applied to this work: Yella dies in a car accident (the car falls into the Elbe River), but the audience thinks the woman had survived. This is possible because of an almost imperceptible change of narrative perspective: we switch from the external to the internal or subjective perspective of the protagonist, who is dreaming her further life while she is actually dying. This means that we pass from an auctorial to an actorial narration – from a zero-focalisation to an internal focalisation (Martinez and Scheffel 1999: 64). The crucial information that Yella has not survived the accident, but has perished by drowning in the waters of the Elbe is withheld. We switch back to the external perspective only at the end of the film, when we finally find out about the real consequences of the accident. There is, however, a whole series of signs in this film indicating that we have left the first level of the diegesis and that we are in an intradiegetic dream of the protagonist. But we do not have enough information to interpret these signs correctly. We can try to explain them by assuming that maybe we haven’t understood everything or that the protagonist has a distorted vision of the world because of her traumatic experience. On the visual level, these signs could be interpreted as an ‘aesthetic surplus’. An example of these signs is the recurrence of the colour red – the fact that the characters are always wearing the same clothes, or the omnipresent theme of water. All these signs share a certain ambivalence and do not indicate clearly that we are in the protagonist’s dream world, composed of a day’s residues.

Furthermore, these details are characterised by a certain casualness, by means of which images, especially moving images, can show things and persons without the viewer ascribing a meaning to each detail. As abstraction is difficult to achieve on the visual level of the film, the viewer assumes that some elements of the picture are incidental, or, as claimed by Eco (1985), that they belong to the cinematographic code, but have no function within the filmic code. This concreteness of the picture gives the filmmaker the opportunity to play with the ambivalence of the elements in it and to leave the viewer in doubt as to whether these elements fulfil a narrative function, a mimetic function or both.

Now, where do we find this ambivalence in *Yella*? And is it possible for the audio description, in its current form, to preserve this ambivalence?

On the visual level, the film seems to preserve the illusion of reality, but, as we saw, the intradiegetic level of the story is made up of fragments of the diegetic level and is filled with signs that indicate to us and to the protagonist that she is drowning.

There is the recurrence of the colour red in Yella’s surroundings. The opening credits already link her name with this colour, and then there is the red of her

blouse, the red dustbin liners on the train she takes after the accident, the red of the traffic lights wherever she goes, her new friend's red car, the red bag over the bus stop sign she passed – all of these details seem to be irrelevant for the assumed diegetic level, but they become important symbols on the level of the dream. How does the current audio description deal with these ambivalent symbols?

One of these signs is picked up by the audio description – the red blouse that Yella wears for several days. In each new sequence the fact that Yella is wearing this red blouse is mentioned. However, the other signs are not picked up by the audio description – which is understandable, since even the repeated mention of the red blouse already comes across as very insistent and could seem pedantic or mysterious to the audience.

As these kinds of details of the image are shown casually and can be interpreted as 'reality filmed by chance' – as a cinematographic code without meaning for the action – mentioning them in the audio description places much too strong of a focus on them, taking away all the ambivalence. The strategy of unreliable narration is thus insufficiently taken into account by the audio description.

Here we have a problem that is due to the ambivalence of the filmic code and to the different form of presentation of iconic and linguistic codes. Of course this does not mean that linguistic codes cannot be ambivalent. But ambivalence is difficult to achieve on the basis of the guidelines for audio description. The demand of formulating simple sentences that carry just one piece of information per sentence (Vercauteren 2007: 144) may be comprehensible in consideration of the target audience of audio films, but in our – admittedly tricky – case, this demand contradicts the narrative function of the film. Casualness, ambivalence and the multiple connotations of signs cannot be achieved by a text with a paratactic syntax with one piece of information per sentence. In order to produce similar effects as the visual level of the film, the use of more complex sentences and other stylistic means should be permitted. Kluckhohn (2005) has already mentioned the importance of word order in audio description, but she also clings to the necessity of paratactic syntax, although it would be possible – in my view – to move ambivalent details to more unobtrusive places in the sentence by using hypotactic syntax to give varying degrees of emphasis to the information (Weinrich 1971: 211-237). The above-mentioned symbolic elements of the visual level, like the red lights or other 'warning signs', could be embedded in a larger context. The argument that the audience would find it difficult to understand the text is not valid here, because the goal is to move the focus away from the ambivalent details, without withholding them completely from the audience.

A similar problem arises in another scene in the film that takes place before the accident. We are confronted here with a symbolic anticipation of the further action. Yella is sitting in her father's living room, there is a pennant on the wall above her head with the inscription *Veritas – Qualitätsarbeiter* ('quality worker') – between these two words there is a labyrinthine line leading to a dead end. As far as this strange detail is perceived by the spectator, it will probably be attributed

a mimetic function and understood as a pennant of the GDR, a likely thing to be found hanging on the living room wall of an elderly man in Wittenberge, a city in the former GDR. We even get some information on the narrative level about Yella's father, about his past and the current problem of unemployment brought about by the new social order. But in view of the further story, this pennant pointing like an arrow at Yella can be interpreted as an inauspicious portent announcing her early death. This impression is reinforced by the calendar hanging on the other wall that seems to add "Your days are numbered". But Yella turns her back to it, so she can't see it, just as she won't see the truth of the accident.

Similar signs are the pictures hanging in Yella's hotel room, above her bed and all showing motifs of water that indicate her actual whereabouts: under water in the river. These signs, like the red traffic lights, are hidden in the scenery and can't be therefore easily taken into account by the audio description without surprising the audience or being interpreted as a strong hint. This kind of detail could only be embedded in a larger description of the room.

Once again, when it comes to longer descriptions, the describer is confronted with the potential lack of time. But even if he had enough time, there would still be the problem of the motivation for such a description. Is the *effet de réel* a sufficient motivation for a description of seemingly incidental details? Can the describer invoke the fact that every description provides additional information for the target audience, allowing them to be as well informed as the seeing audience?

Given the fact that the feature film is a narrative and that the describer hasn't got much time for descriptions, the elements of the picture should not be described for their own sake. The *function* of the elements to be described should play an important part in choosing them, as should the question of *how* they are to be described. For example, I think it is unnecessary to always describe in the same mechanical way what the characters look like: filmic pictures may show or not show us things or characters, but they are not able – like language – to confine their depiction to certain characteristics. It is thus definitely worth asking what motivates a description – even if the reasons are not the same as those mentioned by Lukács. This motivation should lie in connecting the descriptions to the actions of the characters.

There is such an opportunity in the scene where Yella walks through the empty train, striding past red bin-liners. The German audio description says "*Sie läuft an Müllsäcken vorbei durch den Gang*" – 'She walks down the corridor past bin-liners' (14.47). Because the colour red is not mentioned here, this element cannot be retrospectively interpreted as a sign, and cannot, therefore, adopt a narrative function. On the other hand, the insistent repetition of the fact that Yella always wears a red blouse could be toned down by avoiding the mention of the colour every time. It would be sufficient to mention it from time to time just to refer to the fact that it is the same blouse.

A good possibility for linking descriptions to the characters is the direction of their gazes. For example, in one shot Yella's glance falls on the monitor of

Philipp's laptop at the very moment the screensaver mode is activated: a huge wave breaks across the screen. It is a pity that the audio description ignores this detail, as it would have been sufficiently motivated by Yella's glance.

But audio description should not only describe what the character looks at, but also the gaze itself. Two of Yella's significant gazes are not mentioned or are not sufficiently described. The first is when Yella opens her eyes for the first time after her accident: this gaze marks the transition between the external and the internal focalisation of the narration. The eerie effect of it is produced by Yella lying there for about thirty seconds without moving. As she opens her eyes, the fact that she is staring is not mentioned; instead, the scene is described without any ambivalence "*Yella öffnet die Augen. Sie blickt in eine Baumkrone.*" (11.52) ('Yella opens her eyes. She looks up into a treetop'). A more ambivalent formulation would be "*Yellas Augen öffnen sich, starr ist ihr Blick nach oben gerichtet, in eine Baumkrone*" ('Yella's eyes open, she stares upward, into a treetop'). This formulation leaves enough room for the audience to interpret this gaze either as the look of a survivor or of an undead.

Yella's second important gaze occurs in her hotel room, where she is sitting by herself. We see her performing meaningless movements, which are nevertheless described by the audio description, e.g. "*Mit dem Fuß angelt sie nach ihren Pumps. Dann legt sie die Hände auf ihre Knie*" ('She reaches with her feet for her shoes. Then she puts her hands on her knees') (49.00). What is important is that the next moment she turns her head and looks straight into the camera. This gaze – a stylistic device that is never unmotivated in feature films (Metz 1997: 30-42) – can be explained in retrospect by the fact that there are two narrative levels here, between which a metalepsis occurs. This glance is not meant to unmask the technical device, but Yella undertakes the dangerous attempt to switch back to the objective level of narration and to face the truth – even if she does it without success. Only at the end of the film does her gaze pierce through and reveal to us that Yella is dead. The fact that this look is not mentioned in the audio description can be explained by the difficulty in naming the direction of her gaze: saying "she looks into the camera" or "at the audience" may be misleading for the audience. But it would have been easy to include in the description that her glances often look distressed – indicating that she has doubts about the reality of what she sees and hears.

I hope that this brief analysis of the film *Yella* and the few examples given from the audio film have made it clear that there is a tendency in audio description to describe visual elements of a film only because of their mimetic function and to neglect their narrative function. This phenomenon can be explained partly by the lack of time for more extensive descriptions, but it is also due to the stylistic guidelines for audio description. If the goal really is the participation of blind or visually impaired people, allowing them to share in the filmic experience, then the narrative, aesthetic and entertaining elements of the film should be better taken into account. I would, therefore, like to argue for a weakening of the strict

rules for audio description and especially to allow the use of a more complex syntax that would be able to give varying emphases to the information and create room for connotations and ambivalence.

This presupposes of course that there is enough time and that the description can be connected to the characters and their actions. If this is not possible, the question is whether the describer should be allowed to motivate the description of certain details in other ways. Concerning the pictures with water motifs, for example, could the audio describer say “Yella’s gaze falls on these pictures” in order to motivate their description? Or is it sufficient to mention that she is sitting right under them? Or would it be enough motivation if the pictures are mentioned in the context of a wider description of the whole room? For example, “*Sie betritt ein geschmackvoll eingerichtetes Hotelzimmer, wo die Farben des Dekors genau aufeinander abgestimmt sind. Alles ist in einem wässrigen Blau gehalten*” (‘She steps into a tastefully decorated hotel room with a harmonious colour scheme: watery blue is the dominant colour’). This kind of description would seemingly put the focus on the atmosphere of the room and fulfil an *effet de réel*, while casually letting drop the word ‘water’ or ‘watery’. The choice of means certainly depends on the time at the describer’s disposal. But these options are surely preferable to an unmotivated short description of the pictures, as it is the only way to preserve the ambivalence of the pictures’ function.

In view of Kautz-Vella’s study (1998), which underlines the proximity between audio film and radio drama without obliterating the differences between these two types of text, it would be conceivable to supplement the soundtrack of the original film. It could be interesting to think about adding sound or music that would provide more interpretative options for the audience – in *Yella* that could be more sounds of water or instrumental music with similar associations. As long as these adaptations are subordinate to the style of the original film, I would not consider this to be an unjustified interference with the original, as Fix and Morgner (2005: 150) fear it would be. Disregarding the narrative strategies of the original film in a schematic audio description seems much more problematic to me than such an intervention. It is for that reason that I think a weakening of the guidelines and an examination of the narrative possibilities of radio drama would greatly enrich the expressiveness of audio film. After all, the target audience of audio films is heterogeneous and there are certainly a lot of people able to understand hypotactic and more complex syntax. For them a strict implementation of the guidelines could be considered as a kind of spoon-feeding, only lowering their pleasure in the film.

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