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Audio description, audio narration – a new era in AVT

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INTRODUCTION

Audio description, audio narration – a new era in AVT

This special issue is the second monograph dedicated exclusively to audio description (AD), the first being the volume edited by Ulla Fix in 2005 with the title *Hörfilm. Bildkompensation durch Sprache*. In less than five years, what used to be an incipient audiovisual translation modality has come of age and has established itself with a firm grip of the discipline, guidelines, and standards, and impressionistic opinions are now bibliographical anecdotes.

The scientific investigation of AD, as is the case in many other academic fields, began when the practice had already been established, even though it was firmly rooted in only very few countries in the market of Audiovisual Translation (AVT). The lack of systematic study and theoretical reflexion gave rise to a false start, diverting studies into a much misguided dilemma of subjectivity versus objectivity, and the creation of unpatronising descriptions. Fortunately, AD was claimed as a modality within AVT, allowing academics to question already established characteristics and reassess its features. This special issue takes a fresh look at this new era in AVT by presenting seven contributions that take a number of different perspectives on audio accessibility of film.

Anna Marzà Ibañez addresses one of the main challenges of AD, namely that of selecting relevant aspects from the overwhelming amount of visual detail in film. Her emphasis is on the implications of this selection process for the teaching of audio describers. By bringing together evaluation criteria and film narrative, Marzà Ibañez manages to combine a systematic analysis of existing guidelines with a thoroughly practical application to the didactics of AD.

Aline Remael and Gert Vercauteren investigate the as yet unexplored field in AVT of the interlingual translation of AD. In their argument they point out that the spread of this AVT mode to countries with small speech communities, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, inevitably gives rise to the practice of translating AD originally created in another language. They subsequently address the uneasy position of this translation mode between AD, AVT and the interlingual translation of static texts before turning to the linguistic translation issues and the extralinguistic cultural issues that impact this specialised mode of AD. In a similar vein, Sabine Braun and Pilar Orero look at the particular challenges that arise when a foreign-language film (that has not been dubbed) is audio-described for an audience for whom the dialogue also has to be translated. They discuss the specialised AD mode of audio subtitling (AST) as a form of AVT that draws on elements of subtitling, audio description and voiceover (and even dubbing). One of the main problems they identify is that AST cannot simply be a voicing of the subtitles of the film, as subtitles also rely on the audience being able to see the context of the dialogue in order to make sense thereof. They then take a descriptive approach by analysing strategies used in existing AST and AD film.

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Against the background of the central tenets of universal design theory, John-Patrick Udo and Deborah I. Fels advance a discussion on the AD of live theatre. Current practice in the AD of theatre is evaluated against the seven principles of universal design. The article is particularly meaningful in the insistence on AD not as assistive service but as part of the artistic whole of theatre that should be central also in the articulation of the creative vision of the director. In her equally practice-oriented contribution, Louise Fryer emphasises the importance of the delivery of AD integrated with the existing soundtrack and dialogue. Her approach focuses on the dramatisation of AD to create a form of audio drama that will allow the audience to gain more vivid imaginary access to the fictional world of film.

In his article on the state of AD in the UK, Steve Finbow uses an episode from Ridley Scott's 1982 film, *Blade runner*, audio-described by a practising UK audio describer, as the framework for a discussion on the narrative imperative of the mode that is often ignored or neglected in guidelines as well as AD practice. He takes a critical look at existing AD guidelines and practice in arguing for the evocative power of narration in re-visioning the multiplicity of the visual codes in film. Finbow also emphasises an aspect that is often overlooked in AD, namely the importance of narrative point of view in the face of the discursive plurality of cinema. He further calls attention to the fact that audio description/narration is a simulation and subjective reconstruction of the fictional reality. Jan-Louis Kruger's article picks up on similar elements in audio narration in arguing for a re-narrativisation of film. In his view, audio narration is a mode that seeks to provide access through an integrated, independent narrative at the narrative extreme of a descriptive–narrative continuum. Like Fryer, Kruger places an emphasis on the integration of audio narration with the iconic auditory codes of film. In looking at audio narration as a mode that is closely related to narrative fiction, he focuses on the re-narrativisation of focalisation in audio narration.

Pulling together a number of strands in current research in audio description and audio narration, this special issue presents an important step in the definition of the field of study and the many possibilities of research within the field.

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