The Routledge Handbook of Audio Description

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Audio introductions

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1. Introduction

Audio introductions (AIs) were originally conceived as introductory notes aimed to provide blind and partially sighted audiences with relevant information about the opera or theatre performance they were about to attend (York, 2007; Holland, 2009). Over the past few years, they have become a staple media accessibility service – one that deserves its own entry in a handbook of audio description, such as this volume. AIs are also a rare beast in that, unlike other typical media access services such as subtitles and AD, they are not normally played over the main film/performance to which they are providing accessibility. This highlights their unique and flexible nature, which may account for the interest they have attracted amongst practitioners and, to a lesser extent, amongst researchers. Indeed, AIs seem to reflect some of the changes that media accessibility is currently undergoing, such as Greco’s (2018) three shifts (access for all rather than only for sensory impaired audiences, access planned from inception rather than added as an afterthought and access informed by the users rather than only by experts’ views) and the increasing use of creative media accessibility (Romero-Fresco, 2021 and forthcoming).

This chapter covers the definition and main functions of AIs, the strategies used and contents found in this type of media access service and how AIs have been approached so far from the point of view of both research and professional practice in the case of film, theatre and opera. A final section is included to discuss how the flexible and fluid nature of AIs reflect current changes in the areas of audiovisual translation and media accessibility and what this tells us regarding how they can be used from now on.

2. Definition, content and main functions

In the guidelines of the European project ADLAB,1 AIs are defined as

a continuous piece of prose, providing factual and visual information about an audiovisual product, such as a film or theatre performance, that serves as a framework for blind and visually impaired patrons to (better) understand and appreciate a given ST [source text].

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AIs can be used in combination with an AD or as stand-alone pieces and can be recorded and made available beforehand (for instance via a website) or can be delivered live, as is often the case in the theatre. The recorded AI can feature a single voice or can include a combination of voices and sound bites.

AIs often include information that is relevant for the users and that, due to time constraints, cannot be included in the AD (if there is one). AIs for live events often include musical extracts or interviews with members of the cast and provide relevant information from the printed programme, including running time, cast and production credits, as well as detailed descriptions of the set, costumes and characters. They may also describe the director’s input in terms of the nature of the production – for example, whether the acting is naturalistic or stylised and whether scene changes are marked by a lowered curtain or flow seamlessly from one to the next (Fryer & Romero-Fresco, 2014). More generally, AIs for live events aim to “provide a framework that the audience can use to infer implicatures during the performance, to shape audience expectations and complement their background knowledge where necessary” (Reviers and Remael in this volume). Much of this applies to AIs for film, which must engage the listener’s attention, whet their appetite and, most importantly, enable them to appreciate the film’s inherent cinematic qualities (Fryer & Romero-Fresco, 2014).

As found in a corpus-based study of 52 AIs produced from 2009–2012 by professionals and student describers in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Belgium and Catalonia (Reviers & Remael, 2013; Reviers & Rooftchoof, 2018), the most common type of content covered was general information about the event (describers, theatre venue, length of the performance, special announcements), general information about the piece (genre, translation, history of the performance, rewrite or adaptation, author/writer/composer/playwright, libretto), information about the specific production at hand (credits), information about the plot, scenography (set design and lighting) and characters (Reviers et al., forthcoming).

On the basis of these content categories, the authors of the study distinguish five different types of functions for AIs (Reviers et al., forthcoming), which apply to both live events and film. The first one is the informative function, whereby AIs provide the audience with information about the production obtained from paratexts such as the website and the programme booklet:

Welcome to this audio introduction to the Oscar-winning documentary *Man on Wire*, directed by James Marsh in 2008. It’s based on the novel *To Reach the Clouds*, by French high-wire artist Philippe Petit, intercutting reminiscences by Petit and his accomplices with reconstructions of the events leading up to their dramatic feat: on 7th August 1974, they strung a cable between the two towers of the World Trade Center, in New York. Poised on the cable, some 1,350 feet above the ground, Philippe walked from one tower to the other, without safety net or harness, before turning himself in to the Police. The stunt was dubbed “the artistic crime of the century”.

(*AI for Man on Wire created by Louise Fryer [Romero-Fresco & Fryer, 2013]*)

If the information about the plot is brief and factual, it can be included as part of this informative function; if it is longer and plays a more important role in the comprehension of the AD, it should be included within the narrative function. AIs also have a foreshadowing function, with the description of visual information that was not able to be included in the AD and that
anticipates aspects of the production such as the look of the film/set, the lighting, the physical characteristics and costumes of the characters:

Present-day interviews with Philippe and his friends are filmed in colour, the presentation sleek and stylish – talking heads brightly lit, framed against plain backgrounds in interior locations. By contrast, the earliest footage of their younger selves, played by actors who bear a strong resemblance to them, is shot in black and white.

(AI for Man on Wire created by Louise Fryer
[Romero-Fresco & Fryer, 2013])

AIs can also fulfil an explanatory function, highlighting aspects that may be too difficult to grasp without full access to the visuals:

For the flashbacks to Jamal’s early childhood, the dialogue has English subtitles. For the more recent past, present and future, the dialogue is in English.

(AI for Slumdog Millionaire created by Louise Fryer
[Romero-Fresco & Fryer, 2013])

These explanations often end up fulfilling an expressive function that highlights the effect of a particular device:

The cinematic style reflects modern films like City of God and contemporary Indian cinema. . . . The style emphasises India as a disorientating, vibrant, place, awash with colour and contradiction.

(AI for Slumdog Millionaire created by Louise Fryer
[Romero-Fresco & Fryer, 2013])

Finally, as shown in a recent study by the arts access charity Vocal Eyes (Fryer, 2021), AIs can also have an instructive function, with information regarding how to get to the venue, how to use the headphones for transmitting the AD, and so on.

Given the flexible nature of AIs, these functions may vary according to the specific production at hand. In their corpus analysis of AIs produced over the past few years, Reviers et al. (forthcoming) identify a trend moving away from the “factual, informative style that was clearly dominant in the AI corpus initially studied” and closer to “the explanatory function and in particular the expressive dimension”. Whereas they ascribe this transition to the way in which theatre is currently evolving, it will be argued in this chapter that it may also be related to recent developments in media access and the appearance of creative media accessibility.

3. Strategies and language

Although there is no fixed template that can guarantee the production of a successful AI, the guidelines drafted by the ADLAB project provide a series of pointers that can be useful. Firstly, if there is (or there is going to be) an AD, the AI should be informed by it. The information in the AI should be structured logically, depending on the genre and nature of the production and following a narrative thread so that the transition between the different sections is not abrupt. AIs can begin with a welcome word, the running time of the introduction and factual details about the production. This may be followed by a combined description of the plot
(taking care not to reveal too much information) and characters (as they are more memorable when they are placed in a narrative) as well as a description of relevant visual aspects that merit inclusion in the AI. All of this can include quotations from cast and crew, reviewers or even soundbites or pieces of interviews, in the case of recorded AIs. A balance must be struck between providing enough information and not overwhelming the audience, which leads to a recommended duration of up to ten minutes for live AIs for theatre performances and up to 15 minutes for recorded AIs.

Most authors agree that AIs must be written for the ear and that, given that they are not played over the production, but rather before, they must be vivid and memorable. This calls for a fluent style, avoiding complex syntax and ambiguity. Even though the language of an AI can be adapted to the language and tone of the production (a film or a play for children will require a more straightforward AI than that of a literary or historical production), AIs often feature short and simple sentences, more coordination (“and”, “but”, etc.) than subordination, contractions, rhetorical questions, the use of the first person plural and the present tense to involve and engage the users (Fryer and Romero-Fresco, 2014).

The following words by Fryer sum up what may be expected of the language of AIs:

The language of AIs must be clear and accurate to provide the necessary factual and visual information about the film; they should be vivid and memorable to engage the listeners’ attention and whet their appetite; and insightful to help blind and partially sighted people appreciate the film’s inherent cinematic qualities (Fryer and Romero-Fresco, 2014: 25).

4. Research

There seems to be general consensus that research on AIs is lagging behind professional practice. Publications devoted specifically to AIs are still few and far between. York (2007) and Holland (2009) were pioneers in writing about AIs for live performances in the UK, which was followed by publications about the use of introductions at the opera in Catalonia (Orero & Matamala, 2007; Cabeza & Cáceres, 2010; Corral & Lladó, 2011) and the aforementioned studies by Reviers et al. (forthcoming) identifying the functions of AIs.

The first reception studies with AIs were carried out by Romero-Fresco and Fryer (2013) in the UK. AIs for the films Slumdog Millionaire (2008) and Man on Wire (2008) were produced and played, along with the films, to 20 volunteers (of whom 12 were blind and eight had low vision). Participants either attended a session at the University of Roehampton or took part at home, in both cases completing a questionnaire about the AIs and the films. Di Giovanni (2014) replicated the study one year later at the University of Macerata (Italy). 20 participants (15 blind, five with low vision) watched Slumdog Millionaire and completed a questionnaire about the Italian version of the AI and the AD. A second replication took place at the University of Warsaw and the Jagiellonian University with Man on Wire (Jankowska, 2013). The reception of the AIs tested in the UK study was positive. Most volunteers agreed that the AIs helped to bring the films to life (Slumdog Millionaire 100%; Man on Wire 87.5%) and made them easier to follow (92% and 100%, respectively). One of the participants explained that “the AI gave me the kind of information that I wouldn’t get in the AD for the film. It made me very eager to watch the film and really enhanced the viewing, as I was able to relate what I heard in the AI to the film as I watched it with AD”. Most of the participants were happy with the length of the AIs, the amount and type of information devoted to visual
style, plot, characters, locations, cast and crew and the possibility of downloading AIs for other films.

Some differences were found across countries. In Italy, 40% of the participants thought that the AI for *Slumdog Millionaire* gave away too much information (55% disagreed) and 45% felt overwhelmed by information. In the UK, whereas 85% of the participants were happy with the duration of the AI to *Slumdog Millionaire*, 31% of the users thought that the AI to *Man on Wire* was too long. Given that the latter was in fact two minutes shorter than the former, these responses reflected the perception of some users who thought that the proportion of the AI for *Man on Wire* devoted to characters was too long. Indeed, unlike in *Slumdog Millionaire*, where this information was largely woven into an outline of the plot, in *Man on Wire* the AI presents the description of the characters as a list at the very end. This format does not seem to aid memorability. Also problematic was the description of the “talking heads”, which tends to be less vivid and compelling than that of feature film characters. In view of this, the Polish study shortened the AI for *Man on Wire* by around 30%. The section on characters was still considered too long by 53% of participants, but 73% said they would like AIs for more films. In all three studies the AIs were received very positively, as participants noted that the AIs provided them with information they did not have access to. One of the UK participants highlighted that “the AI puts the frame in so you can see the picture better. I feel now that I could actually see the film, as the AI added the colour”. Interestingly, some participants attributed to the AD the merits of the AI, for instance praising the AD of *Man on Wire* for the information about time/place switches and the changes from black and white to colour, all of which featured only in the AI. The professional AIs described in the following section delve further into this idea of merging boundaries between AIs and ADs, which accounts for the fluid quality of AIs as highlighted in this chapter.

An interesting recent contribution partly related to AIs comes from the The Describing Diversity project, involving the arts access charity VocalEyes and Royal Holloway, University of London. The project looked at the topical issue of how to describe physical markers of race, gender, disability, age and body shape. Following a review of 26 AIs from the VocalEyes’ archive covering a variety of genres, the team found that whiteness appears to have been presented as the default (whiteness is not described whereas blackness is), that there are longer descriptions of women’s bodies compared to men’s and that descriptions of disability sometimes have negative connotations or focus on a departure from “the norm”. As a result, the report “Describing Diversity” (Hutchinson et al., 2020) was produced, including, amongst other outputs, 12 principles for audio describing human characteristics in an AI and 12 recommendations for theatres and theatre companies.

Finally, a key contribution in this area is the recent article by Reviers et al. (forthcoming) on AIs for the performing arts, which draws on the comparative discussion of two case studies involving the production of AIs for the theatre. The authors point out the need to approach AIs “as a research topic and translation service in its own right”, one whose unstable nature positions it at the crossroads between translation and creation and somewhere in between the source text, the target text and a paratext. For Reviers et al., this resonates with current debates about the role played by Complexity Thinking in translation, where the latter is currently being regarded as a form of organised complexity, in other words, “dealing simultaneously with a sizeable number of factors which are interrelated into an organic whole” (Tymoczko, 2019).

As mentioned in the introduction, AIs may also be regarded as illustrative of some of the changes that media accessibility is currently undergoing, such as the aforementioned
Greco’s three shifts, accessible filmmaking/integrated access and creative media accessibility. To re-cap, according to Greco (2018), accessibility, and media accessibility in particular, is currently in a state of transition from a particularist account to a universalist account of access (access for all rather than only for sensory impaired audiences), from reactive to proactive models (access planned from inception, rather than added as an afterthought) and from a maker-centered to a user-centered approach (access informed by the users rather than only by experts’ views). This has materialised in models such as accessible filmmaking or integrated accessibility (its counterpart for the performing arts), which envisage the integration of accessibility and translation into the production process through the collaboration of access experts and the creative team (Romero-Fresco, 2019; Fryer, 2018). Given their collaborative nature, these models are often resulting in examples of what may be referred to as creative media accessibility (Romero-Fresco, 2021 and forthcoming), that is, practices that do not only attempt to provide access for the users of a film or a play, but also seek to become an artistic contribution in their own right, often enhancing user experience in a creative or imaginative way. Creative media accessibility may also be referred to as alternative media accessibility, in so far as it stands in opposition to most AVT and media accessibility guidelines.

Some of the AIs described in the next section illustrate these changes, as they were designed for and used by people with and without disabilities; they were planned during (pre)production in collaboration with the creative team and they involve the users in different ways, often creatively and in a way that is not envisaged in standard AD guidelines. This accounts for two features of AIs that are highlighted in this chapter: their flexibility (in terms of content and form) and their fluidity with regard to AD – that is, the fact that they have the potential to merge with the AD not just in the users’ memories, as mentioned previously, but also by actually being integrated within the AD.

5. Professional practice

Audio introductions are a recurrent accessibility service in theatre and opera performances in many countries – much less so in the case of film.

In the UK, the Royal Opera House has been providing AIs for almost 20 years. All Main Stage productions have AIs, which are now provided by the company Sightlines and which can be accessed before the day of the event on the Royal Opera House SoundCloud or at the venue, 15 minutes before the event, through a headset or over a wireless/infrared loop. This AI normally lasts for ten minutes and provides details of the setting, characters and costumes as well as background information about the production and a brief synopsis of the first Act. A shorter, five-minute commentary about later scenes and Acts is available during each interval. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and as part of its #OurHouseToYourHouse initiative, the Royal Opera House has been piloting operas and ballets made accessible via streaming. The first accessible performances were Cendrillon and The Cellist, provided with a ten-minute AI and full AD in May 2020.

UK theatres also use AIs regularly and, over the past years, they have been pioneering new and creative uses. This is the case of Extant, UK’s leading professional performing arts company of visually impaired people, which applies integrated access and thus conceives AIs and AD from the start as an integral part of the production. For them, description is not a neutral way of conveying the source text but rather a creative device for “connecting both audience and performer to each other and the artistic content of a piece in a positive way” (Cavallo, 2015: 133). As noted by Louise Fryer (2018), researcher and audio
At the next rehearsal for *A Zimmer of Hope*, I was able to discuss aspects of the audio introduction or pre-show notes with the actors, in particular the descriptions of each character, so the cast knew how I was describing them and I could ensure they were comfortable with it. For example, I was able to check that my estimates of ages were accurate. However, one of the cast heard my description of another (“He looks like a man who enjoys rock music and works out”) and questioned it, so I revised it to “and tells me he works out”. It could be argued, then, that integrated AD could be subject to a degree of censorship resulting in a more biased description than traditional “warts and all” AD that an independent describer working detached from the company might provide.

In Antwerp, the Toneelhuis theatre has been offering AIs yearly since 2009 (Reviers et al., forthcoming). AIs are provided in two formats: pre-recorded and live. Pre-recorded AIs are available online or at the entrance hall. They focus on style, movements and patterns and they promote the performance. Live AIs are played 15 minutes before the performance; they are part of the social event and they allow the audience to test the headset before the play and to meet the describers. Most of these AIs are produced by professional describers hired by the front office rather than by the artistic team and are thus not examples of integrated access. However, some degree of collaboration is envisaged, as these AIs often include introductions made by the actors. As far as opera is concerned, the Flemish Opera has been collaborating with the University of Antwerp since 2015 to provide one or two performances a year with AD and AI. The descriptions are made by scholar and professional describer Nina Reviers and professional freelance describer Victoria Hopchet. In some cases, such as in the AI for *War and Turpentine*, discussed in Reviers et al. (forthcoming), the introductions were produced with input from the artistic team.

In Italy, the Macerata Opera Festival has been engaged in accessibility projects for over ten years through its InclusivOpera programme and in collaboration with the University of Macerata, the Italian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired and the National Deaf Organisation (Di Giovanni, 2018). This involves the provision of ADs, AIs, surtitles and assisted listening services. Some of the AIs produced have experimented with creative elements, such as being delivered by blind and partially sighted children’s voices, which was first tested in 2018 for a performance of *Carmen, la stella del circo di Siviglia*, adapted from Bizet’s *Carmen*. This has continued with other operas such as *Elisir d’Amore* and now that some of the children have turned 18, they have become regular paid voices for other operas.

AIs have not proved so popular for film yet. Following the aforementioned studies with the AIs for *Man on Wire* and *Slumdog Millionaire*, as well as the AI for *Inglourious Basterds* produced by the same author (Fryer & Romero-Fresco, 2014), the subtitling company Subti (www.subti.com) developed a free iPhone application allowing users to download AIs at film festivals. These AIs included details of cast and crew, a synopsis, information on how the film project came about and comments by the director and writer. The first trial, conducted in the 2011 Venice Film Festival, raised a great deal of interest and obtained promising results.

AIs have also been used for television series, as in the case of The Flemish Public Broadcaster VRT, which published several podcasts on their website with background information on the series, its locations, settings and characters (Remael, 2016).
An interesting and innovative use of AIs for film may be found in Kate Dangerfield’s ground-breaking documentary *Within Sound and Image*. As part of the Accessible Filmmaking Project (Dangerfield, 2017), funded by the British Film Institute (BFI) and the UK-based disability charity Sense, Dangerfield set out to make a documentary about people with complex communication needs based on a series of filmmaking workshops that she delivered at Sense in 2016 and 2017. The plan was to involve the participants in the provision of accessibility for the film, but it soon became clear to her that the participants needed to tell their own stories, thus becoming co-directors of the film. The film has a separate, stand-alone AI. However, it also uses introductions within the main description of the film, which, in itself, is part of the voice-over narration accessible for all viewers, thus blurring the boundaries between AI, AD and narration. This is exemplified in the way in which Kate, herself a participant in the film, pauses the film and provides a voice-over narration to introduce Ted Evans, another participant who she is interviewing in his office in Hackney (London):

Kate: I’m just going to pause the film for a second. This is Ted Evans. He’s a filmmaker. We’re in his office in Hackney doing this talking head interview. It was the 31st August 2018. I probably should have punched in, so the computer screen to the right of him would have been framed better. It would have cut out that glass of water and those few leads placed at the bottom right edge of the frame. Oh, I didn’t realise that small sculpture of a body on top of the speaker just behind the computer. Ha! There’s a pink cocktail umbrella in its hand and a book of stamps wedged between its legs. Ted is a bit out of focus, actually.

Following this, Dangerfield goes on to explain why she is pausing the film:

You might be wondering why I’m talking so much. Well, I’m trying to make the film accessible to as wide an audience as possible. By pausing the film, there’s time to describe the images in case you can’t see them. It also means there’s time to introduce people in the film, so if you’re reading the subtitles, you won’t miss the name tags that usually appear, like this [the tags are now displayed on the screen].

Hope I’m not talking too much, though. . .

With this innovative use of AI, Dangerfield acknowledges the role played by access from the beginning (rather than treating it as an afterthought) and explains it to spectators who may not be familiar with it. As is sometimes the case in essay films, which are typically self-reflective and self-referential, Dangerfield uses “you” to address the spectators. However, film essays normally address fully sighted and hearing viewers, whereas this filmmaker’s inclusive approach addresses everyone.

Dangerfield’s AI/AD also experiments with colour correction. Here, the image shows Kate interviewing Zara (another participant), as Kate’s voice-over narration reflects on the colour of their skin:

You can change the colours with the editing software too. There are presets available, like this . . . Black and white. Then you could add single colours, like a stencil effect. Make Zara’s hair brown, her skin white. My skin is a bit too pink now. Or make the whole image a sepia tone. I’m not trying to recreate a film from early cinema though.
Finally, the AIs included within the main AD of the film are also used to introduce the different filmmaking workshops covered in the documentary, which is sometimes done through the use of intertitles or through introductions delivered by the participants or by the electronic voice of a screen reader.

Dangerfield’s use of AIs illustrates the three aforementioned shifts in media accessibility: it is collaborative, planned from inception and addressed to all viewers, with and without impairments. Perhaps most importantly, it is a clear example of creative media accessibility, as it does not only attempt to provide access for the spectators, but it also becomes an artistic contribution in its own right, enhancing user experience in a creative and imaginative way. In contrast with the focus on user comprehension typically found in standard media accessibility guidelines, the focus is shifted towards the engagement of the users. AIs are treated here as both flexible and fluid, as the boundaries between AIs, AD and even narration are almost completely blurred.

6. Conclusion

AIs have had a relatively long life in the performing arts, as they have been recurrently used for years now at operas and theatres in countries such as the UK, Spain or Belgium. This does not apply to film, where AIs remain experimental and anecdotic, perhaps more due to lack of habit than to logistics. Experiences such as the ones mentioned earlier by Subti in Italy and VRT in Belgium show that it is not difficult to make AIs available online before film screenings and even play them at the cinemas before a film starts.

Research on AIs has also been disappointingly scarce, limited to a few pioneering publications and contributions on how AIs are made and, in some cases, received in different countries. The few corpus-based studies carried out so far confirm the heterogeneous nature of AIs, whose functions and contents change according to the type of audiovisual product that they are introducing. They seem notoriously difficult to pin down in order to be included in a set of prescriptive guidelines. However, rather than being a problem, this may be their most valuable asset, as they remain a little “pocket of freedom” in an otherwise constrained environment where what can be described (and how) is strictly constrained by time and guidelines. This freedom goes a long way to explaining the very flexible nature of AIs.

As media accessibility moves into a somewhat new territory (visible, collaborative, aimed at a wider audience and more creative), AIs are an ideal tool to experiment with the still untapped artistic value of accessibility, which explains why this flexibility is now being complemented by a certain fluidity that is blurring the boundaries between AIs, AD, narration and dialogue. More widely and as well as fulfilling their traditional role to introduce operas, theatre plays and films, AIs seem to be pointing the way to a new and fruitful encounter between media accessibility and audiovisual creation.

Notes

1 ADLAB (“Audio Description: Lifelong Access for the Blind”) was a three-year EU-funded Life-long Learning Programme conducted between 2011 and 2014. Visit www.adlabproject.eu/ for more information.
2 Information about the project and its outputs, including the final report, can be accessed on the Vocal-Eyes website: https://vocaleyes.co.uk/about/research/describing-diversity/
3 More information is available on the Royal Opera House website at www.roh.org.uk/visit/accessibility
7. Further reading


8. References


