1. Introduction

This chapter, in its role as illustrator of in-house training in audio description, takes as its example the training of new describers at German public broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR) in Munich. BR has been active in the field of audio description (AD) since 1997 and has established over the years a well-tuned workflow in the production of description that is still done mainly in-house. Although describers are freelancers and work mostly at home, editing of the text, recording and mixing of the description are done in BR’s own sound department with BR’s own voice talents and technicians.

Since to date the opportunities to be trained as a describer at public or private universities in Germany are very limited (e.g., in 2020 there were only courses at the University of Mainz in Germersheim and at the University of Applied Languages SDI in Munich), In-House Training has been available for some time.

This chapter will present the various steps of the Bayerischer Rundfunk In-House Training process and its advantages compared to training in a university context.

2. Steps in the training programme

2.1 The course part one

Step 1: how to find the best candidates for the course

What is the best profile a future audio describer should have? People often write letters or emails to ask for training at BR. That may fill the course but does not guarantee that the most talented people in the field will be found. The trainers may look for experience in writing text, for experience in the field of translation (e.g., in subtitling), for knowledge of film theory or even expertise as a screenwriter or director. It may help if the candidate has had or has contact with blind or visually impaired people and has perhaps done some ad hoc description in a cinema or theatre for them. However, the best way to get an idea about the possible talent of any future describer is a description itself. So a short exercise is sent out to everyone who applies...
In-house training

for the course. This consists of just a small video clip of several minutes with the task of giving an ad hoc description. If the candidate fails this exercise, he or she is not admitted; if they pass, he or she may be chosen for the course. The total number of people should normally not exceed 12 to ensure that work and discussion are easy to handle.

Step 2: how to start the course

Day One of the course begins with a global introduction into the topic of audio description: where does it come from? What happens in different countries around the world? What has happened in Germany to date and what is the status quo in the fields of TV, VoD, DVD and cinema (our main fields of AD production), but also in the fields of theatre, opera and museums. This is all illustrated with a series of video clips from BR’s AD output to demonstrate how description sounds in different genres and how it deals with different challenges.

Then the concept of workflow in writing and producing description is introduced. This deals with the question of how many describers may work together in writing the text (from a team of three including one blind person to a single author) and how we decide which route we should take. The candidates receive answers about special software to write the script and why BR normally does not use a single software package. They will learn about costs and how much they get paid if they are hired in the future.

To get a view into the practical work, an example of an audio description script with all the formal material required is here presented.

A timecode (for example 10:06:37) is provided for every AD block with a keyword (a spoken line or a sound or music effect that appears before the description starts) as in this example from the German AD (here translated into English) of the classic movie Psycho:

10:06:37

In an office: outside in front of the window Alfred Hitchcock stands on the sidewalk with his face turned away

Marion comes in.

10:06:45

(Sound of door)

To a brunette:

10:07:20

“Then, well...”

(spoken fast here) Two men enter, one with a Cowboy hat.

10:09:18

“very thirsty”.

Tom Cassidy, the guy with the Cowboy hat, enters Lowery’s office. To Marion:

10:09:29

“Yes”.

The brunette walks over to Marion and takes one of the money packets.
Step 3: how to use guidelines and strategies

After this first introduction into the basics of audio description and examples from practical work, there follows a discussion of national guidelines including the strategy concept from the first ADLAB project (Remael et al., 2015). Although there are some differences in national guidelines, for example from the UK, Spain or Germany, the basics are not so distant from one another:

Candidates learn that:

• description has to fit in between the dialogue gaps;
• description has to answer questions on Where, Who and What;
• description has to include people’s appearance and the setting;
• description can include colours, sounds and text on screen; and much more.

The dangers of summarising instead of describing, interpreting instead of describing and the right timing of description to avoid spoiling or misunderstanding will be addressed. An important discussion revolves around the naming of characters (from the first appearance of a person or only after the name is given in the dialogue, etc.) and how description should be presented by the narrator (neutral or more empathic).

Step 4: how to prepare the first description

With all the input from the first steps, the candidates will start with their first description. This is normally a short clip from a TV series or a TV movie with few challenges, some dialogues and enough time to put the description in between the gaps. To introduce discussion about the right tools to adopt, short group exercises are used to begin with. The first is that everyone thinks of a room he or she knows like their own living room or kitchen, a hotel room or the place where this training takes place. Everyone has five minutes to write down a description of the room and then some volunteers will present their description while another candidate tries to draw the room while hearing the description. This always proves to be a worthwhile experience.

For the second exercise a picture is projected and everyone has to imagine that this is the opening of a movie. Again, a description should be written this time without any dialogue and timing restraints. The challenge of writing a description that lasts one minute and then editing it to a description of only 30 seconds may also be set. The outcomes are presented and discussed with the whole group. Then the candidates are advised to form groups of three to do the description of the short clip from the TV series or TV movie together. The idea is that one of the three pretends to be blind and does not look at the screen when the text is written. The other two describe what is there and the three of them write the script together. Even if writing
description in a team of three is not done in the real world very often, it is still a good exercise to train and learn together how description is done. The teams have several hours to work together. That may finish day one of the course or even start day two. The results of the groups are then presented to the whole course and discussed using all the input from the first day. This is not about good or bad description but to learn from the experience of others and to compare problems and possible solutions with other candidates. If possible, the description that was professionally written and produced for the clip may be presented. As all the material that we produced in-house can be used, a clip where a description is available is usually chosen.

Below is an example of a description (translated from the original German) written for a short clip from an episode of the popular German crime series *Tatort* (place of crime) (without timecodes, keywords in quotation marks).

*It is day. Behind high blades of grass a mountain range. The view falls through woody stalks. Behind it, a figure approaches blurred.*

*The figure wears a white dirty shirt. It is Batic. He has abrasions on his face. Confused, he looks around. Batic is in his mid-fifties and tall. He has a sporty figure, gray wavy hair, an angular face and narrow blue eyes.*

*He comes to a pasture fence. In the background houses.*

*In a supermarket: his legs are walking next to a refrigerated shelf. Batic wears only one shoe. A bald employee looks at him suspiciously. At a display with wrapped baguette rolls Batic stops, takes one and stares at it.*

*In a city apartment: Leitmayr and several forensics.*

*“Thank you”*  
*He goes to the bathroom. In the tub lies a dead woman clothed “tonight”.*

*Leitmayr puts on gloves. The forensics wear white overalls.*

*“I’ve got something there”.*

*She gives him a wallet. He takes out a passport.*

*“she was one of us”.*

*He shows her the police ID.*

*“one of us”.*

*From the temple of the young dead woman a trail of blood runs down to her neck.*

*(noise of scanner at checkout)*

*Batic digs in his pockets. Behind him, many customers are queuing up. The bald-headed employee keeps watching him. Batic opens his wallet.*

*“the card there”.*

*He pulls out the card and looks at it. The cashier takes it from his hand and puts it into the card reader.*

*“Enter pin”!*  
*Batic looks helpless from the cashier to the display.*

*“the bread”.*

*The hand of the cashier with extended glittering fingernails lies close to the salami baguette.*

*“So, what is it”?*  
*Batic looks uneasily on the baguette and presses his lips together. The cashier nods to the bald man. He comes over. Batic grabs the baguette.*

*“get the police”.*

*Batic starts running. . .
“Now give the goods”! (little peep)  
... and overthrows a shelf. Outside he bumps into two customers and stumbles against the shopping cart of a woman.  
(little breathing)  
Again, the picture is stained and scratched. Batic turns around in panic. Everything is spinning around him – sometimes slowly, sometimes fast. The image flickers and flashes.  
(AD text by Olaf Koop, Hela Michalski and Rudolf Beckmann, Edited by Elmar Dosch and Bernd Benecke)

Step 5: how a script is turned into a recorded description

One advantage of doing In-House training in a company that does In-House production of audio description is that all the technical equipment of the sound department where description is produced can be used. And this is the case with the descriptions that the candidates wrote on their first day. Every team of three gets the opportunity to record the description they wrote on the previous day in the AD sound booth. One of the AD technicians will edit and mix the description with the original soundtrack and it will sound like a professional description in the end. The candidates now get a feeling of what happens with their text and what is possible in the editing and mixing process. That will undoubtedly have an influence on their writing in the future.

Step 6: how to use the Audio Description Evolution Model

In the next step candidates will work on a longer and more challenging clip. We keep the teams of three to establish a kind of group routine. Exceptions are possible, for example, when the group members did not harmonise very well or when a blind or visually impaired person is part of the course and as many people as possible should benefit from this input, so he or she could switch from one group to another.

Before the work on this second clip starts, a short introduction is given into the Audio Description Evolution Model ADEM, developed by Bernd Benecke in his dissertation on “Audio Description as partial translation” (Benecke, 2014a). All candidates are advised to use parts of the method included in ADEM when writing their second description.

The ADEM method is here explained:

The over-all aim is that a describer, who experiences joy or fear or disgust when watching a film, a play or an opera, makes this experience accessible to a blind and visually impaired audience. This is done by replacing the Picture-Sound-Interaction in the original with a Text-Sound-Interaction in the description. The text interacting with the sound will have the same function for the blind and visually impaired as the picture interacting with the sound has for the sighted audience. The requirements for this are:

Discussion of the anticipated audience: for whom is the original intended – for children, for young adults, for a higher educated audience etc.? Knowledge of the anticipated audience leads to conventions in the delivering of the film, the play, the opera, etc., that are necessary to understand the Picture-Sound-Interaction in the original. Then the communication between describer and the blind and visually impaired audience is considered. Is this an AD for children or grown-ups, for a higher educated audience or not? Blind children may have a smaller picture memory in comparison to grown-ups who had been able to see for a long time in their life.
Help and restraints in the sound: music and sound effects can design and transport emotion, e.g., presenting the emotions and intentions of a character by creating an *emotional dictionary* (Lensing, 2009: 212f). Dissonance in the music can cause irritation and threat to the audience and may make them see things that are not in the image. But on the other hand, sound can cause a lot of trouble for the describer. Music, for example, can be unempathetic (Chion, 1990: 8); this means it does not cover the emotion or mood of a scene but does just the opposite. For example, it is nice and smooth in an action or horror scene or dramatic in a relaxed context. The AD has to work against the sound in that case and make clear what is really going on. The same is true with *audio-visual dissonance* (Chion, 1990: 37), when sound and image are going different ways; when dialogue, music and sound effects do not fit what is in the image. So, the question to ask is whether there is an *emotional dictionary*, which helps in characterising characters and settings? Does the music raise certain emotions in the audience? Are there dissonances in the sound? Are there music or sound effects that are unempathetic? Is there *audio-visual dissonance* somewhere?

As regards the overall context of the original in the view of the describer, this is examined by using the “methods of scientific translation” (Methoden des wissenschaftlichen Übersetzens) proposed by Gerzymisch-Arbogast and Mudersbach (1998). Rather than going into a deep analysis of the methods in this chapter, we will just outline the basic logic, though some terminology will be explained. For the overall context we do a *holistic* analysis of the original, which means, in layman’s terms, we ask ourselves, what is the main topic of the original, what is it all about? For *The Lives of Others* (Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006) we may think, for example, that this is a film about communist East Germany in the eighties. But going more into detail and using information found on the Internet or in books on the film (Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006; Falck, 2006), we may reach the conclusion that the main topic of *The Lives of Others* is the changing of sides of Stasi-officer Wiesler – his “trying to be a good man” (as a song in the film proposes). We will then set up a hierarchical structure, that includes all the aspects in the film referring to that main topic. This is known as a *Holon of Content*.

Figura 32.1 (only the middle column) shows a part of the Holon “Wiesler’s changing of sides”, the *Holem* (a sub-unit of the Holon) “Wiesler on the Christa/Dreyman side”, describing him in the end sequence of the film.

We may also make a *holistic* analysis of the formal aspects of the original and set up a *Holon of Form*, which deals with, for example, technical aspects like “black-and-white”, flashbacks and slow motion in film, or the set decoration of a stage in a play or an opera. After having completed these three requirements, a detailed analysis of every scene, an *atomistic* analysis will be conducted. Therefore an *Aspective matrix* (Gerzymisch-Arbogast & Mudersbach, 1998: 49) is set up, with all the scenes of the original in the vertical axis and in the horizontal a series of *aspects* which are important for the AD. These are the length of the dialogue gaps, the intensity of the action, the importance of sound effects and music, the names of characters and settings appearing, and sometimes additional and individual aspects depending on the source material.

Table 32.1 shows the *Aspective matrix* for the first six scenes of *The Lives of Others* with all the aspects mentioned previously and some additional ones that are important, especially for that film. Every aspect is then classified for every scene – for “intensity of action”, a one indicates “intense” and a two “quiet” – so we can identify with a single look where in the film or the play the action is intense and where not, which has a direct effect on the possibility or
Figure 32.1  Holon “Wiesler’s changing of sides” in The Lives of Others
### Table 32.1 Aspective matrix for The Lives of Others (first six scenes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>1 Dialog gaps</th>
<th>2 Action</th>
<th>3 Sound/Music</th>
<th>4 Specials</th>
<th>5 Names</th>
<th>6 Names</th>
<th>7 Noises</th>
<th>8 Special Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3. Long</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenes</td>
<td>10:00:00</td>
<td>1.3.</td>
<td>2.2. (Title) 2.1. (Hallway)</td>
<td>3.2. 4.1. Written Text</td>
<td>5.2.</td>
<td>6.1. Prison (Written Text)</td>
<td>7.2.</td>
<td>8.1. Stasi (Written Text)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:00:37</td>
<td>1.1.</td>
<td>2.2.</td>
<td>3.2. 4.2.</td>
<td>5.2.</td>
<td>6.2.</td>
<td>7.2.</td>
<td>8.2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:02:03</td>
<td>1.1.</td>
<td>2.1.</td>
<td>3.2. 4.2.</td>
<td>5.2.</td>
<td>6.1. Stasi High school (Written Text)</td>
<td>7.1. Sample of smell</td>
<td>8.2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:06:17</td>
<td>1.1.</td>
<td>2.1.</td>
<td>3.2. 4.2.</td>
<td>5.1. Hempf Dreyman</td>
<td>6.2.</td>
<td>7.2.</td>
<td>8.1. MfS (Sound)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:08:40</td>
<td>1.2.</td>
<td>2.2.</td>
<td>3.2. 4.2.</td>
<td>5.1. Wiesler Grubitz Hauser</td>
<td>6.2.</td>
<td>7.2.</td>
<td>8.1. OV (Sound)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:11:21</td>
<td>1.3. (Beginning) 1.1. (End)</td>
<td>2.2.</td>
<td>3.2. 4.2.</td>
<td>5.1. Christa Jerska</td>
<td>6.2.</td>
<td>7.2.</td>
<td>8.2.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
necessity of description. Doing this for the whole source material means we get a detailed overview of all the important aspects and how they are classified.

The next step in the ADEM method is to look for the interaction and relations between characters, objects and settings in the source material. This is done by creating a Synchro-optic network (Gerzymisch-Arbogast & Mudersbach, 1998: 54). The Synchro-optic network is important to check if something that is mentioned in the soundtrack or in a Coherence Description is understandable on its own or needs some information from earlier scenes. If the network tells you that additional information is needed you have to go back to that earlier scene and include the information in the AD there. However, is has to be said that the Synchro-optic network is not very useful in practical work because it is very difficult and time-consuming to create. Therefore, it is skipped over in the training although it would be very helpful if it already existed.

Finally, we go back to our Holon in Table 32.1 and extend it to a Sound-Picture-Holon: this is done by connecting the subunits of the Holon, the Holems, to the scenes where they appear in the film or play or opera. We can just draw a line to show which Holem is appearing in which scene, where it has a Concretion (Gerzymisch-Arbogast & Mudersbach, 1998: 64). If the line goes to the left, then the Holem concretises (appears) in the sound, if it goes to the right, it concretises (appears) in the picture. This Sound-Picture-Holon shows now which subunits of the Holon are already given in the soundtrack (and therefore are not or less important for the AD) and which appear only in the picture (and are therefore important for the AD).

The elements that should be integrated in the training of new describers are summarised here:

1 check requirements:
   1a who is the anticipated audience of the AD?
   1b what is helpful or problematic in the sound of the original?
   1c what is the overall context of the original?
2 write down a Holon;
3 write down an Aspective matrix.

Step 6: how to write a description using the Audio Description Evolution Model

Every team will now watch the second, this time more challenging clip (which is normally about 20 to 30 minutes long) for the first time and before starting their description they should do what is demanded by ADEM. This means check the requirements, write down a Holon and an Aspective matrix for the clip and use it while describing. The Aspective matrix is a very good tool if the describers need to go back, for instance, to find out when a person appeared for the first time, when she or he became a name, or a description of the appearance. The chosen Holon will have an influence on the description itself. Depending on what the describer thinks about the overall context of the film, the description of that film will change.

Below is an example from a course where every team received the first 20 minutes of the film Inglourious Basterds as a second clip. We noticed that the chosen Holons where either “the fear of LaPadite and his family” or, on the other hand, “the threat by Nazi officer Landa”. In the opening scene there are two situations where very little description is possible because things are happening simultaneously with the family and with Landa and his crew. Describers have to decide what is more important and in doing this their Holon will guide them.
Below are the different descriptions of the first situation. A team with the Holon “the fear of LaPadite and his family” wrote (translated from the German original):

\[\text{The father looks at the vehicles. He wipes his forehead and beard with a dirty handkerchief. His clothes are worn. The father shows worry in his deep blue eyes and goes to the house.}\]

Whereas a team with the Holon “the threat by Nazi officer Landa” described this as:

\[\text{The father lowers his eyes. The escorted limousine has almost reached the house. As the vehicles pull up, he cools his face and neck with the water. The military vehicles, two motorcycles and a car, reach the top of the road. Three soldiers are facing a colonel who is sitting in the back seat of the open car.}\]

It becomes more obvious with the second situation. A team with the Holon “the fear of LaPadite and his family” wrote when Landa meets the daughters of LaPadite:

\[\text{The daughters, one blonde and two brunettes, stand fearful and quiet in the room with their hands clasped.}\]

Whereas a team with the Holon “the threat by Nazi officer Landa” described this as:

\[\text{Colonel Landa is wearing a long leather coat and a briefcase. He has a bony face and an intense look.}\]

Step 7: analysing the second description using Holon and Aspective matrix

After finishing the work on that second clip the candidates will again present their descriptions to the whole group and discuss the outcomes and the problems that appeared while writing the text. The difference to the analysis of the first clip is that every team presents first their Holon so that everyone can learn what influence this had on the final description. Again, this is not about good or bad; every Holon is possible and everyone’s outcome is worth discussing. After finishing the discussion, including the analysis of the professional written description of the clip, we go back to the AD sound booth and again every team gets the opportunity to record the description they wrote for the clip. One of the AD technicians will edit and mix the description with the original soundtrack and it will hopefully sound like a professional description in the end.

Step 8: how to go on with the work after the course

After the recording of the second written descriptions, the course normally ends with some additional information on description and with questions from the candidates. At that point some of them may have realised that writing audio description is not what they want to do in the future. And the trainers may have realised that some other candidate is not as talented in writing AD as was expected. At the end of the course a group of talented candidates could emerge willing to work, and attempts would be made to get them into the business. This could mean that they are integrated in an existing team where they could learn further. Or short episodes of a not-so-difficult-to-describe-series are given out for them to work on. Of course,
they would be paid from that moment on. This phase could last for approximately a year. Their descriptions over this time would be examined and feedback given after every piece of work. Then the opportunity to participate in a second course for advanced describers would be offered.

2.2 The course part two

Step 1: another exercise

Again, there is an exercise for everyone to prepare for the second course. And this time it is a very challenging clip produced by very experienced describers for professional production.

An example of such a description is provided here so what is actually on screen can be imagined. The scene is of a terrorist attack. It is obvious that this scene is not easy to handle – some describers may also have problems being confronted with this topic. It is a scene from the German crime series *Polizeiruf 110* (Call Police 110), the episode is called *Because they don’t know what they’re doing*.

```
“You’ll never walk alone”
The mounted police officers are on the square in front of the arena. * Meuffels looks over to the stadium. The guy with the backpack stands near the parapet of the ramp.
“The colleagues also mean . . .”
Meuffels notices him briefly.
“If 60,000 want to go home here”
They change a look. Then Meuffels sneaks to the parapet. The young man is gone.
“Hey colleagues, access”
Two police officers storm off.
“Police, stop”
They run along the ramp.
“Police”
In slow motion: Anna makes her way through the crowd in a pedestrian tunnel.
“Hey”
The young man is close to her.
“stop”
A blonde young woman turns and looks at her.
“damned”
Meuffels turns around the corner.
“Anna”
Flashback: the bearded man holds the pistol into his mouth. The young man hurls the backpack. It flies through there in a high arc. The bearded man pulls the trigger.
(explosion)
People crouch. A cloud of dust shoots at Meuffels and covers him. A boulder hits the blonde woman on the back of her head. She falls. It’s getting dark. A neon lamp falls down and goes out. People feel their way through the smoke. Flickering neon light penetrates the dusty air. The blonde tries to get up, other people lie and crouch in the corridor, two people push themselves over the floor. A ceiling lamp goes out. The picture turns black.
```
Pale light flickers in the tunnel. The air is full of dust. Meuffels gets up very slowly. With the back of his hand he wipes his mouth. Hair and clothes are covered with dust. In the dark, the glow of a flashlight approaches.

“Anna”

The beam of light wanders over a man’s bleeding leg stump. Meuffels puts his hand over his mouth.

“Anna”

An old man is sitting on the wall with his eyes wide open. His body twitches. Meuffel continues. A woman lies on her stomach on the floor and touches her bleeding knee. A man leans over an injured woman.

(AD text by Anke Nicolai, Alexander Fichert, Roswitha Röding, Edited by Bernd Benecke and Elmar Dosch, without timecodes, keywords in quotation marks)

The second course will start with the presentation and discussion of that exercise. Depending on the working situation, candidates may have written their text alone or as part of a team. Everyone has been advised to use the requirements of ADEM and to create an Aspective matrix and, if necessary, a Holon. All this is presented to the whole group and will normally lead to a lively discussion on how and why to write the description in this or that way.

Step 2: how to write description in different genres

After the discussion of that exercise there is always time to clear questions that came up while working on that clip and to talk about all the experiences the candidates had in their first year of writing descriptions. This may reveal that the outcome of an audio description may depend on the genre that is described. Therefore, in the next exercise all candidates will choose a genre that they find difficult or where they think they need more advice and feedback. Describers may even bring their own clips from films they had problems with. Or they simply name the genre and an example is provided by BR.

Below are some examples from genres where BR’s describers sometimes faced difficulties. They had problems, for example, with the speed of things happening in Action films, with fantasy worlds in Science Fiction films, slapstick in Comedy films, nature description in Documentaries and special interest knowledge in Dance films. These aspects are briefly illustrated in the following examples:

Action films – Example: The Fugitive

Kimble peeks through a shattered disk: a spotlight is approaching on a track. Kimble bends over the black guy.

The moustachioed man and Copeland climb through the smashed windows. Kimble grabs the Black guy onto his shoulder. A long freight train rushes up, loaded with logs and tanks. With difficulty, Kimble helps the Black man out headfirst through a window. He rolls down a bank.

Kimble swings his legs through the window and pushes himself up. The train is getting nearer to the bus: it’s stuck across the rails. Kimble stands on the window frame. The train is slowing down.

Kimble looks over the roof at the approaching train. It rams the bus, Kimble jumps.
The locomotive pushes the bus in front of him. A clutch disengages: a second locomotive and wagons derail, roll through the embankment towards Kimble. He rushes in his shackles in front of the wagons.

At the last moment he dives under a bridge, the locomotive and the cars thunder past him into the river. Water splashes up.

The wagons crash into each other, tanks explode, a fireball rises, tree trunks fly through the air.

(AD text by Anke Nicolai, Hela Michalski and Haide Völz, edited by Bernd Benecke and Elmar Dosch, without timecodes, keywords in quotation marks)

The difficulty lies principally in synchronising the many dynamic actions so that they can be understood in order of occurrence and in relation to each other. A further difficulty lies in rendering the subject-complement structures, with so many subjects and complements following one another in close proximity. The background sound, necessarily loud and continuous, while not providing more than the obvious meaning of the crash, also impedes the delivery of the detailed AD.

Science Fiction films – Example: Blade Runner

A glimpse of the city’s gloomy sea of houses that reaches to the horizon.

Violent flames explode from high chimneys. From a distance, a spinner – a flying car with headlights – approaches and flies over it.

A flash of light from the dark clouds over the city.

Another pillar of fire shoots out of one of the tapering vents, at the top, red position lights shine.

Again, a spinner hunts over the sea of houses and moves away. At the rear, the drive nozzle lights up. The blue iris of an eye reflects the lights of the city and a pillar of fire. Far behind the chimneys two gigantic, sloping buildings, reminiscent of Inca pyramids. From their flat roofs radiate two huge beams of light in the hazy sky.

The iris reflects explosion flames. The view approaches one of the pyramids. On each of its four sides are two skyscrapers with countless illuminated floors. They are inclined parallel to the slopes of the pyramid. In a barren, smoke-filled office with a ceiling fan, a man in a suit looks up at a window slot. Glaring light falls through. A view from outside on a facade segment with some window slots. Behind it are four ceiling fans.

(AD text by Olaf Koop, Hela Michalski and Rudolf Beckmann, edited by Bernd Benecke and Elmar Dosch, without timecodes, keywords in quotation marks)

The major difficulty in this case, as with all sci-fi fantasy films, is that of describing scenes with which neither the describer nor the listener is familiar. Secondly, certain terms which are important in the context of the film need to be explained (for example, spinner – a flying car with headlights), thus eating up precious time. Thirdly, the switch from outside to inside locations needs careful attention: the presence of ceiling fans is correctly included in the description as they represent low-tech elements within a decadent high-tech world.

Slapstick and Comedy – Example: Dinner For One

James buries his hands in a tailcoat, bowing low and stumbles in this attitude over the tiger head (Laughter) to the sideboard.
In-house training

He takes a bottle, leans further, stumbles to his knees and holds it close to his eyes. Then he walks along the table, tipping port wine into Miss Sophie’s cup. She continues to eat unperturbed, looking at Sir Toby’s place. Staggering and with clenched lips he gazes down onto Sir Toby’s chair. Jerkily James tilts the bottle forward, the wine sloshes into the cup, which falls over. James picks it up again, pours it full and wavers past the table. He returns to the end of the table, kneels, bobs twice and jumps with his bottle up. He hurls the wine over the table into Admiral von Schneider’s mug.

He next pours the wine into the other cups, staggers around Miss Sophie’s chair and takes a long slug from the bottle. James stumbles toward the sideboard, hops with both feet over the tiger’s head and puts the bottle down. Grinning, he returns to the place of Sir Toby.

(AD text by Kerstin Gaedicke, Anke Nicolai, Katharina Regehr; edited by Bernd Benecke and Elmar Dosch, without timecodes, keywords in quotation marks)

Slapstick comedy is particularly difficult to describe precisely because it is so visual. The canned laughter can be of assistance in indicating that something funny is happening, but is merely frustrating to the listener if they cannot synch the action to the audience reaction. Therefore the description must capture each amusing moment, preferably just before it occurs, in order to synch with the laughter. Fortunately slapstick does not usually contain extended dialogue (consider the escapades of “Mr. Bean”), enabling the describer to cover the action undisturbed, but timing is never so important as in this type of AD.

Documentary films – Example: Earthflight

“to draw consumable conclusions from it”.

The vulture sails with wide wings.
“are very promising”.
An antelope herd flees. Three lionesses are trotting over the grass.
“then still lions appear”.
From the back of the flying vulture: the look goes past the head and a wing.
“But he will stay tuned”.
Below a dry plain.
“A vulture has time”.
In front of one of his dark brown eyes the translucent nictitating skin closes briefly. The look accompanies a light brown lioness.
“never get enough of lion hunts”.
Two of the lionesses break away from the third and run faster. (drumming) The sailing vulture is brownish-feathered. In flight, the gaze falls vertically on a fleeing Gnu herd.

(with cut)
On a green level, lionesses hunt the Gnu herd. (little Muh) The brown ungulates have curved horns.

(with picture)
The vulture moves its head in different directions. A lioness runs in the middle of the scattered herd.

(bit of music)
Between the innumerable wildebeest, a lioness replaces one of the animals. A gnu runs past a lioness; she jumps and pulls it to the ground.
“The vulture makes his choice”.
A lion with a mane caught a wildebeest and bit his throat. The vulture lands between grasses.

(AD text by Olaf Koop, Stefanie Schruhl and Rudolf Beckmann, edited by Bernd Benecke and Elmar Dosch, without timecodes, keywords in quotation marks)

Unlike the slapstick example, a documentary inevitably includes a spoken accompaniment, usually a monologue. The description has to fit in the gaps left free by the speaker. In the case of nature documentaries, such as the one in this example, the monologue is often continuous, and in fact, already provides a type of description, though it differs from an AD in that it also includes extraneous comment, value judgements and various other elements of appraisal. The AD in these cases provides the “what you see is what you say” as the speaker provides any other input. In any case the major difficulty lies in adapting to this spoken accompaniment, describing the key moments in the action as they happen “an antelope herd flees” and keeping pace with the soundtrack “The vulture makes his choice” – “the vulture lands between grasses”. In the attempt to capture the scene in all its detail, the cameramen continually change vantage point. The shift from the ground (the lions) to the air (the vulture) changes the perspective of the action and the description needs to make this clear. Many documentaries require a knowledge of technical terminology and the describer needs to familiarise him or herself with such terms.

Films with dance scenes – Example: Axolotl Overkill

It is day. Through a doorway looking at a teenager with a long, blond braid. She drinks from a glass and puts it down. Then she turns around and approaches with a swaying step. She angles her arms and starts moving like a robot.

The view is separated by a second door frame. The teenager jumps and lands with her legs spread. In robot-like movements again, she dances into the next room. A purple carpet covers the floor there.

Rhythmically, the dancer moves through the room. She wears a grey sweatshirt, black leggings and sneakers. She slides to the floor, gets up again and dances past a leather chair to a third room.

Bookshelves filled with walls. In the middle of the room a green sofa. The teenager dances along its back. Floor-length light curtains cover the windows.

(AD text by Christine Heimannsberg, Johanna Krins and Diana Urban, edited by Bernd Benecke and Elmar Dosch, without timecodes, keywords in quotation marks)

In this case, the first problem is to find the correct terminology to describe what are essentially dance movements – “swaying step”, “angles her arms”, “robot-like movements”, “slides to the floor”. Other movements, however, are described simply with “dances”, which is sufficient for a generalised description for a general audience. However, the kind of audience is very important here. If the listener(s) is interested in or knows about dance and wants to follow the movements from an artistic point of view, then a knowledge of this specialist area is required (Snyder and Geiger in this volume) and requires groundwork on the part of the describer.

Working on the different genre clips will fill the main part of that second course. As some genres need more time to describe, the recording of the descriptions that take less time in our sound booth would be used first, without discussing the text beforehand. By doing it this way it is possible to have an example from every genre recorded and mixed.
Again, the outcomes are presented and discussed and some strategies for the description of these genres are added to our guideline catalogue. All candidates should now have enough practical and theoretical experience to work as a professional describer.

Step 3: the impossible description

Normally at the end of the second course a bonus exercise called “the search for the impossible description” is introduced. Every candidate may bring clips of films where she or he thinks a description might be impossible to create. Very often people bring material from action movies but in the end these all seem describable. Another genre (which we left out in the previous examples) is animation, in which we find many clips where a description could be very difficult, but not impossible.

As the head of AD at BR, this author would like to add a subgenre from comedy: the comedy in a Jerry Lewis-movie (similar to a Mr. Bean type-film), because this is based on facial expressions and body movement. This can be described, of course, but is it funny, in the end? You may decide yourself. There now follows a description text for a clip from the movie Cinderfella. It is a mix of various descriptions for this clip prepared by candidates during a second course. Imagining well-timed recording and mixing, you may think that this could be funny in the end. Have a look:

In a kitchen. Fella makes coffee.
He goes to the radio and turns a knob. He puts a cigarette into his mouth and swings onto the kitchen counter. He lights a match with the sole of his shoe (MATCH) and lights the cigarette. He drops the match next to him in the sink and moves to the beat.

Fella casually blows out the smoke, raises his brow and bows his head back and forth. Bored, he chews an imaginary chewing gum. He straightens up. . .
(Leave accent)
. . . and, with imaginary drumsticks, he starts an air drum solo.
He puts an imaginary flute to his lips. (LEAVE THE FLUTE) He spreads his fingers and closes his eyes. Fella deepens into the game, grooving to the music. In between, he opens his eyes and squints.
With one eye he observes the life of his windy fingers and smiles. He forgets to blow the flute. Then he closes his eyes and plunges fully back into playing.
His upper body wobbles and bends. He rolls his eyes as if in a trance.
Fella stops, looks at the radio and slides off the counter. Prancing he turns around on his own axis and snaps his finger.
With blown cheeks, he leads his hands to an imaginary saxophone. He squats deeper with each beat, tiptoes a bit forward and wiggles his head. He describes a circle in the duck walk.
Fella aligns one knee after the other, pushes his butt up and comes to a stand. With stiff shoulders, he bends over his instrument and ends the solo. He swings ecstatically onto the sideboard. His right sets an accent: (accent) back on imaginary drums:
He jumps up and continues standing. The sticks swirl up, down, left, right, between the legs and (accent) to the accent.
He waves his arms wildly, lifts his right leg and actuates the imaginary hi-head with his foot.

(AD text created by several authors in seminar group work)
3. Concluding remarks

In this chapter the process of In-House Training at Bayerischer Rundfunk has been presented. It is a follow-up of two courses: a beginner and an experienced describer course. In the first course, everything starts with theory and many examples of existing descriptions. People then write their own description, first for a simple clip, then for a more challenging one. Presenting the outcomes to the whole course and discussing this is a main part – as is the recording and mixing of the material in a professional surrounding.

Between course one and two there should be a longer phase of active describing, normally one year. With the experience of that work the candidates move to a second course where they mainly train in the ability to describe different genres. Again, this is recorded and mixed in a professional sound booth. With a bonus exercise on “impossible description”, the course ends and the describer’s lifetime work can begin.

Note

1 Coherence Description is the first step to be taken in writing AD when the aim is to create a coherent mix of original soundtrack and AD that makes sense to the blind or visually impaired user. It is a spontaneous first description for the user and he or she may ask questions about things that remain unclear. The outcome of this process – a coherent mix of soundtrack and AD – might in some cases be near to or equivalent to the final AD, but in most cases it is not. In a very extreme way, you may think of a nonsense AD that gives a coherent outcome with the soundtrack but has nothing to do with the content of the pictures. This is why Coherence Description is only the beginning of the creating process – but without doubt an important one.

4. Further reading


5. References


6. Film references

Oetzmann, J. (Director). (2009). *Tatort, Episode 749: We are The Good Guys* [TV movie]. Germany: BR.