
Audio describing visual intertextuality and cultural references as a challenge towards inclusion

By Valeria Illuminati (University of Bologna, Italy)

Abstract & Keywords

English:

Audio description as an access service is a cornerstone of inclusive theatre(s). The ever-increasing presence of audiovisual contents, especially when they are inextricably intertwined with cultural and intertextual references, represent a major challenge. This article aims at offering a first insight into the audio description of these contents, analysing the strategies adopted from a descriptive perspective. After an overview of the different categories of audiovisual contents found in some recent Italian performances, the audio description of intertextuality and cultural references in the 2018 play *La classe operaia va in paradiso*, directed by Claudio Longhi, will be analysed. Drawing on this analysis, I also attempt to discuss how integrating accessibility in the creative process can help overcome some of these difficulties and make a performance more accessible and inclusive.

Keywords: audio description, accessibility, access service, theatre, inclusion, intertextuality, culture

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, accessibility and inclusion have become a priority at the international level as crucial values to be promoted in order to “ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms” (United Nations 2006: Article 1). Recent research in the field of Media Accessibility bears witness to “a shift from particularist accounts to a universalist account of access” (Greco 2018: 211). This evolution at the epistemological level towards universal and inclusive concepts of access and accessibility implies that “while access was previously thought to concern *exclusively* or *mainly* specific groups of people, it is now understood to concern *all* human beings” (Greco 2018: 211). This new universal approach to accessibility for all, not limiting it to sensory or linguistic barriers, also implies a direct, active involvement of users not only as consumers but also as creators (Greco 2018; Di Giovanni 2021). In this vein, inclusive theatre-making, understood as the participation of as many people as possible in the production, creation, and viewing experience of a performance (Di Giovanni 2021: 21), is gaining ground, leading to innovative projects like integrated audio description (Fryer 2018a, 2018b; Fryer and Cavallo 2022).

Audio description (AD) “offers a verbal description of the relevant (visual) components of a work of art or media product, so that blind and visually impaired patrons can fully grasp its form and content” (Remael, Reviere and Vercauteren 2015: 9). As an access service, AD can be considered an integral part of inclusive theatre(s). In a recent manifesto developed by the European project Inclusive Theatre(s) and their campaign We All Need Theatres (WANT), audio description is listed as one of the foundations of inclusive theatre (WANT 2022).

This article aims to investigate some challenges in the audio description of theatre performances, namely the presence of audiovisual contents and the intertextual and cultural references often embedded in these multimedia elements. Their complex nature represents a double challenge, both for the describer having to deal with them when scripting the AD and for the level of accessibility and inclusion of the performance itself. In exploring this specific AD challenge, the article brings together some areas to which not much attention has been devoted in scholarly publications thus far: audiovisual contents in live performances and their audio description on the one hand, and intertextuality and cultural references in AD on the other hand.

As Katrien Lievois and Aline Remael point out, “studies devoted to the way in which AD handles intertextuality are limited” (2017: 324), and this holds true for cultural references as well. Moving from this awareness, Lievois and Remael undertake a first more systematic analysis of the way in which AD deals with visual filmic allusions. The film *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre* serves as a case study for their attempt to identify the different types of allusions and the way in which they are audio described. In one of the first studies on the topic, Maria Valero Gisbert (2012) explores intertextuality in the Italian AD of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, arguing that reception studies are needed. This need for reception studies – involving both sighted and visually impaired people – is emphasised also by Raquel Sanz-Moreno (2019) in her analysis of the AD of Almodovar’s *The Skin I Live In*. A chapter on intertextuality (Taylor 2015) is contained also in *Pictures painted in words*. ADLAB Audio Description guidelines, resulting from the European project ADLAB. Christopher Taylor (2014) further describes some possible strategies to handle different types of intertextual references in Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*, while Anna Maszerowska and Carme Mangiron (2014) analyse cultural references in the same film (2014). More recently, Valero Gisbert (2020) examines cultural references in three different ADs of Tornatore’s *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*, adopting a comparative approach so as to explore the way in which the iconic-cultural content of the film is *translated* into the audio described (verbal) script[1]. Finally, Agnieszka Szarkowska and Anna Jankowska (2015) discuss intertextuality and culture-bound elements as part of a wider study on the challenges of audio describing foreign films in Poland. In their reception study, the authors identify a series of strategies and solutions, highlighting the importance of time and the role of recognisability and familiarity with the audience.

After an overview of the different types of audiovisual contents found in some recent Italian theatre productions and their audio description[2], the analysis will focus on the 2018 play *La Classe Operaia Va in Paradiso*, directed by Claudio Longhi. The complex multi-layered visual and cultural intertextuality created through audiovisual projections is a major challenge for the describer and for an inclusive theatre. The article does not attempt to provide a comprehensive categorisation of audiovisual contents or strategies. Rather, it aims to provide a starting point for further investigation.

2. (Audio)visual content in theatre performances

Within the artistic and creative palette of directors, technological innovations have paved the way for an ever-increasing use of audiovisual and multimedia contents in theatre production. For the purposes of this study, the term *audiovisual* will be used in a broader sense to refer to any visual and audiovisual content that is included in the performance, generally through projections, screens, or other equipment: captions and surtitles, projections of static images, videos, and visual effects such as images and videos shown on a see-through veil. These contents meet different creative as well as narrative needs and purposes. In particular, they may be complementary and redundant to what is being staged, thus reinforcing and underlining the message. In other cases, they have an autonomous narrative function: the information is conveyed exclusively through the added audiovisual channel. Moreover, not only does the audiovisual and multimedia content complement what is performed on stage, but it also adds a further level of interpretation, that allows a deeper understanding than the sole stage performance. The presence of these materials represents a real challenge for the audio describer, and this for a number of reasons.

The different nature of the contents is certainly a first challenge, requiring different strategies to be adopted and adapted, also depending on the time available for the description. However, the major challenge arises from the different relationship that develops between the audiovisual content, the dialogue, and the stage action. In other words, if these added elements overlap with important dialogues or actions, the audio describer must carefully evaluate the narrative relevance of the content and the degree of redundancy. Thus, if the information is also conveyed by the main audio and visual channel of the performance, i.e., the stage action, and there are no pauses to insert the audio description, there will be a loss in the visual richness of the product, but the understanding will not be undermined. On the other hand, when the audiovisual content adds meaning to what is performed on stage, the describer must try to limit the losses and preserve this added value given by the multimedia element(s). Finally, it is not uncommon that the (audio)visual content replaces the action on stage, thus serving as the only channel through which the plot is developed. In this latter case, the description is not a major issue, as the available pauses can be used to convey this content. A few examples certainly help to clarify not only the different types of audiovisual and multimedia contents, but also their relationship with the action on stage.

A first category comprises what can be defined as text on stage, by analogy with the text on screen contained in many audiovisual products. This text is generally projected on stage and is not accessible through the audio channel of the performance, but only by reading it. An example of this type of text is the dedication that appears at the beginning of *Qualcuno Volò sul Nido del Cuculo*, directed by Alessandro Gassmann. When the lights go out in the theatre, the text A Manrico (To Manrico), the late actor to whom Gassmann dedicated the performance, is projected on the black backdrop. The information is integrated into the AD:

AD: Compare la scritta A Manrico[3]

[AD: the text A Manrico appears]

Example 1

Similarly, this type of captioned text can be used to point to different time planes within the narrative. This is the case, for example, in the Italian adaptation of *When the Rain Stops Falling* by Andrew Bovell, directed by Lisa Ferlazzo Natoli, a family saga that, shifting in time, goes from 2039 to 1959. In the play, time travel is a specific stylistic device: there are no flashbacks, and the complex narrative framework moves through the time and space of the story. One scene flows into the next, introduced by a contextualising caption, for example *Stanza di Gabriel York / Alice Spings, 2039* (Gabriel York's Room / Alice Spings, 2039) or *Stanza di Elizabeth Law / Londra, 1988* (Elizabeth Law's Room / London, 1988).

In other cases, the captions mark the different stages of the narrative development, a sort of bookmark of the different chapters composing the story. In *Ragazzi di Vita*, an adaptation of Pier Paolo Pasolini's novel of the same title written by Emanuele Trevi and directed by Massimo Popolizio, the lives of a group of young boys in Rome unfold into different episodes and time frames, creating a polyphonic play. A *narrator* hovers over the stories, like a stranger visiting. An alter ego of Pasolini himself, the narrator is the mediator between the audience and the stage, the common thread running through all the stories represented. Each scene is introduced by a caption that, like the title of a book chapter, presents the episode, providing a key to interpreting it, e.g., *Furto in Tram* (Robbery on the Tramcar), *Il Funerale di Amerigo* (Amerigo's Funeral). The caption also functions as a sort of intertextual reference to the original work on which the play is based, thus alluding to the literary world.

A similar function is fulfilled by some of the texts included in the stage adaptation-condensation of Primo Levi's *Se Questo È Un Uomo*, by and with Walter Malosti. Once again, the literary origin of the play leads to the use of captions as guides to help the audience and structure the narrative. The audio description generally integrates this information, which represents important – if not essential – references to follow the plot development. Captions are described by resorting to the strategies used for the audio description of the text on the screen in filmic AD, with different levels of synchronicity being adopted with regard to the text appearance: “captions read before they actually appear on screen; captions read as they appear without any further indication; captions integrated in the AD of the action on screen, and captions which are preceded by the expression ‘a caption’” (Matamala 2014: 108). The following example from the AD of *Ragazzi di Vita* shows how the description has been integrated in the dynamic AD:

AD: [...] Tre ragazzi avanzano dal fondo, mani in tasca e aria strafottente. **In alto la scritta Arvaro.** In fondo a destra un uomo imponente e un tavolo da biliardo. A sinistra un ragazzo e un biliardino. Sopraggiunge un giovane con una benda sull'occhio sinistro.

[AD: [...] Three young men walk forward from the back, with hands in their pockets and a cocky attitude. **At the top, the caption Arvaro** [one of the characters]. At the back, on the right, an impressive man and a pool table. On the left, a boy and a table football table. A young man with a blindfold over his left eye arrives.]

Example 2

As Anna Matamala highlights, different approaches to the text on screen – or on stage – exist and how they are dealt with in the corresponding AD depends on “silent gaps, the amount of coexisting visual information, the possible aural-visual redundancy and the role of music” (2014: 115).

Images, pictures, and videos can also provide a setting for the action and the story, thus going beyond the physical limits of the stage and the finite possibilities of scenery and props. *Fronte del Porto*, adapted for the stage by the Neapolitan actor, author, and translator Enrico Iannello, directed by Alessandro Gassmann, resorts to this type of audiovisual material. As also specified in the audio introduction (AI) to the audio described performance, the different settings are created using projections, which fully cover the large white backdrop, and thanks to two moving side walls, which slide from right to left, and vice versa. Since the American classic *On the Waterfront* directed by Elia Kazan and written by Budd Schulberg, starring Marlon Brando, is now set in Naples in the 1980s, the images primarily evoke the narrow alleys of the city, the harbour and the docks – one of the main settings –, a panoramic view of Naples and the bay, etc. These images are described, each marking a change in setting. Even though these scene changes generally do not overlap with dialogues or music and sound effects with narrative value, how detailed the description is depends on the duration of the pause, with great variety in the information that can be included:

(1) La scena si rischiarà, **avvolta da una tenue luce notturna**. Sullo sfondo, **emerge l'immagine di un vicolo di Napoli**, stretto tra due schiere di case. **Una fila di lampioni sospesi illumina appena il selciato**. L'immagine si prolunga in due pareti, a sinistra e a destra del palco. In alto, del bucato sventola leggermente su un filo teso.

[The stage lights up, **surrounded by a soft night light**. Against the background, **the image of an alley in Naples emerges**, enclosed between two rows of houses. **A series of suspended streetlamps barely cast light on the pavement**. The image continues on two walls, to the left and right of the stage. Above, a line of washing flaps lightly.]

(2) Alle sue spalle, il vicolo. L'immagine proiettata sfuma lentamente in quella di una veduta di Napoli da un terrazzo, in pieno giorno.

[Behind him, the alley. The projected image slowly fades into that of a view of Naples from a rooftop, in broad daylight.]

Example 3

In the first example, corresponding to the opening scene, the description is quite detailed and tries to trigger the mental representation of the image described. The references to the kind of light created (“soft night light”; “a series of suspended streetlamps barely cast light”) are both precise and technically explicit. This gives the listener a detailed sense of the way the scene is lit and thus shows how ADs at the beginning of productions try to trigger the imagination. The use of expressive language, especially verbs (e.g., “surrounded by a soft night light”; “the image of an alley in Naples emerges”; “barely cast light”), further seeks to create an immersive experience for the audience with visual impairments, carrying them into the evocative atmosphere created by the images. It is also worth noting in the context of this study that the projection gives quite a stereotypical representation of Naples – the narrow alley enclosed between two rows of houses, the line of washing flapping –, one that is often associated with the city by the Italian audience. Through the lexical choices and precise and accurate vocabulary (e.g., “vicolo”; “schiere”) the AD script aims at reproducing this same effect on the listener and conveying this cultural dimension embedded in the image. In the second example, due to time constraints, the images are briefly outlined: the alley is simply mentioned, as it has already been described, and the description only alludes to the view of Naples, without giving more details (e.g., Mount Vesuvius in the background, the bay barely visible in the distance, the countless roofs). Here again, the AD relies on collective imagination, on a sort of typicality of the image, as well as on a supposed familiarity of the audience with it and with the geography of the city. Similarly, the vastness of the view is implied (“from a rooftop”). These few examples show how the images successfully give depth to the scenery and extend the physical space of the stage. This spatial relationship between stage and projected images is made explicit at the end of the play, when the main character, Francesco, literally enters the image, passing through the canvas of the backdrop and (re)appearing in the video, as he walks away. The AD obviously includes this information and tries to verbally reproduce this highly emotional and sentimental moment:

Avanza verso l'immagine. Entra nel telo dello sfondo e scompare un istante, prima di voltarsi verso di noi. Poi si volta nuovamente e si incammina lungo il molo. Lentamente l'immagine scompare. Buio.

[He moves towards the image. He enters the canvas of the backdrop and disappears for a moment, before turning towards us. Then he turns again and walks along the quay. Slowly the image disappears. Dark.]

Example 4

This is a key and meaningful scene in the production, as it closes the show. By entering the canvas and appearing in the video, Francesco distances himself – also physically – from the other characters and his old life, and as he walks in the opposite direction, he leaves everything and everyone behind. To give the listener the same emotional experience of the sighted audience, the actions are described precisely, and the verbal text relies on a perfect timing of the reading with what is happening on stage. This may also result in adding pauses in the live delivery of the AD to time the description.

In addition to being used to recreate the setting, by supplementing the physical scenery on stage, images and videos can be used to evoke memories and events from the past or to bring to life other imagined worlds and time frames. Once again, the relationship between the audiovisual content and the stage action varies, leaving more or less time for the description, thus also affecting how precise and detailed this description may be. As in

the closing scene of *Fronte Del Porto*, this kind of use of videos and audiovisual materials represents a distinctive feature of these productions, also in terms of style. Depending on the available time, the descriptions are generally detailed and include technical details on their use. This is the case in *Il Silenzio Grande*, written by Maurizio De Giovanni, a well-known Italian author of mystery novels, or in *Skianto* by and with Filippo Timi. *Il Silenzio Grande*, is a play about loss, memory, and (mis)communication and these themes are echoed in the audiovisual content. The video projections included in the performance mostly aim to materialise the characters' memories as they speak. In the final scene, the use of the video even makes it possible to reconnect and bring together the two dimensions, reality and dreams, the living and the dead. While on stage Valerio and Rose embrace and have one last dance, their stage presence is progressively replaced by the projected image. When the video stops and the stage lights up again, Rose is alone at the centre of the stage. The video and the images are always described, often explicitly mentioning in the description the multimedia nature of what is described:

(1) Sul fondo, **la luce chiara del proiettore buca l'oscurità**, come un punto in lontananza.

[In the background, **the bright light of the projector pierces the darkness**, like a point in the distance.]

(2) [...] Valerio avanza verso Rose che lo prende delicatamente tra le braccia. Ballano stretti l'uno all'altra. **Lentamente calano le luci. Scompaiono nel buio mentre i loro corpi vengono sostituiti dall'immagine** di Valerio e Rose che ballano felici, elegantemente vestiti. Lui in smoking, lei con un abito di tulle bianco e lunghi guanti, sempre bianchi. Si baciano. **L'immagine si dissolve**. Rose è al centro della stanza, le braccia lungo i fianchi. Guarda la radio, poi la stanza. Raccoglie la borsa ed esce. Buio.

[Valerio moves towards Rose who gently holds him in her arms. They dance close to each other. **Slowly the lights fade. They disappear into the darkness while their bodies are replaced by the image** of Valerio and Rose dancing happily, smartly dressed. He is wearing a dinner jacket, she a white tulle dress and long white gloves. They kiss. **The image vanishes**. Rose is standing at the centre of the room, arms along her sides. She looks at the radio, then at the room. She picks up her bag and exits. Dark.]

Example 5

In the examples, the mechanism of scenic creation and the theatrical techniques are not hidden from the audience with visual impairments. On the contrary, they are made aware of their presence, also as a form of education in the theatre language. In the first example, the projector is mentioned in the AD as a way to introduce the following detailed description of the images that appear on the veil. In the second example, the description of both the lighting and the use of images is precise and technically explicit ("slowly the lights fade"; "they disappear into darkness"; "their bodies are replaced by the image"; "the image vanishes"). This helps to give the listener a clear sense of the shift from reality to imagination, of the blurring and blending that is created by the combination of light and images.

In *Skianto*, videos are an integral part of the creation of an oneiric reality, a way to represent the alternative dreamy worlds where Filippo, the main character, escapes. More importantly though, videos are the main tool through which the crash – the *skianto* of the title – between his life walled up in a small room and his dreams takes place and through which the audience becomes aware of it, as well. The sudden projection of the "Never say no to Panda" commercials generates an estranging effect on the audience, forcing them to reflect on the sudden shift. In this 2010 Egyptian series of television commercials, a rude giant panda scares and terrorizes people for not wanting to try the Panda Cheese. A similar clash is produced by a series of more or less funny videos with cats, like the ones that have gone viral on the internet and social media in recent years. In these occurrences, also thanks to silence gaps, the AD contains a thorough and detailed description of the images of the videos, with this information being crucial to the intended estrangement.

To conclude this overview, I will now turn to a rather complex aspect, namely when this content comprises an intertextual and/or cultural reference. Sticking to the previous play, *Skianto* includes, for example, music videos and images of Whitney Houston singing her hit song *I Wanna Dance With Somebody*, images from the Japanese series *Candy Candy*, and at a certain point Filippo also wears Hulk's fists, just to cite a few. In Gassmann's *Qualcuno Volò sul Nido del Cuculo*, the story is set in the judicial psychiatric hospital of Aversa during the 1982 World Cup. In one of the scenes, patients are gathered in the common room to watch the final match between Italy and West Germany. Being actually unable to watch the match due to restrictions imposed by the hospital rules, the patients give a joint commentary of the match, focusing in particular on the few minutes before the second goal, scored by Marco Tardelli. With a highly evocative effect, emphasised by a dramatic and epic music, the video of Tardelli's iconic celebration is projected, showing him while he runs screaming at the top of his lungs. All these references have been described, using different strategies as identified by Szarkowska and Jankowska (2015). These include naming, as in the first of the following examples, from the audio description of *Skianto*:

Buio. Cala il velario. **Immagini di Whitney Houston**. Buio. Nell'oscurità la cyclette viene portata via. Quando si riaccendono le luci, Filippo è in piedi su una sedia a sinistra, indossa **i pugni di Hulk**. Al centro della scena un microfono su una lunga asta. Alle sue spalle la parete si è colorata di rosso a pois bianchi. Sul fondo, **un video di Candy Candy**.

[Dark. The veil is lowered. **Images of Whitney Houston**. Dark. In the darkness, the exercise bike is removed. When the lights come back on, Filippo is standing on a chair on the left, **wearing the Hulk's fists**. At the centre of the stage, a microphone on a long stand. Behind him, the wall is coloured red with white polka dots. On the background, **a video of Candy Candy**.]

Example 6

In the second example, describing and naming is used. Not only is Tardelli's celebration mentioned in the AD, but a short description is included, providing "additional information to complete [the] mental picture" (Szarkowska and Jankowska 2015: 253):

Mentre tutti esultano con le braccia in aria, sullo schermo passano le riprese di Marco Tardelli che corre trionfante dopo il suo gol di Italia-Germania 82.

[While everyone is cheering with their arms in the air, footage of Marco Tardelli running triumphantly after his goal in Italy-Germany 82 is shown on the screen.]

Example 7

All these cultural and intertextual references are quite popular and are therefore rather unproblematic in terms of their recognisability and familiarity. In the next section, I will focus on the 2018 play *La Classe Operaia Va in Paradiso*, directed by Claudio Longhi. Here, the extensive use of multimedia contents results in a multi-layered visual and cultural intertextuality that is crucial to fully understand and enjoy the performance. This analysis, adopting a descriptive approach, allows us to discuss the main strategies to which the describer resorts when dealing with visual intertextual references.

3. AD of visual intertextuality in *La classe operaia va in paradiso*

3.1 *La classe operaia va in paradiso*: more than a stage adaptation

In 2018, Claudio Longhi directs a stage adaptation of the political drama film by Elio Petri *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (*Lulu The Tool* in the United States). Released in 1971, the following year, at Cannes, the film was awarded the Grand Prix International du Festival, corresponding to today's Palme d'Or, the festival's highest honour. The same year, it also won the David di Donatello for Best Film in Italy. Created to represent the world of the working class, the film depicts the life of Ludovico Massa, known as Lulù, a worker at a factory paying on a piecework basis. He lives in Milan with his partner Lidia and her son. A workaholic and a highly productive worker, he suffers from an ulcer as a result of overwork, and he blames his lack of interest in having sex with Lidia on the pressure of the job. Exploited by the BAN factory, Lulù is disliked by his colleagues and loved by the management. One day he loses a finger in a work accident and his view of the world changes. He realises his condition as a mere tool in the production process and, for a moment, discovers class consciousness. The play[4] written by Italian novelist Paolo Di Paolo is more than a classic stage adaptation, simply reproducing the same storyline. Here, Lulù's story is intertwined with the genesis and the controversial reception of the film. The original screenplay is repeatedly deconstructed and reconstructed in Di Paolo's new dramaturgical structure. The writer draws on the screenplay by Elio Petri and Ugo Pirro, on materials documenting the film's genesis and its reception – both past and present – and on Italian literary texts from the 1960s and 1970s, reworking and reassembling them in an attempt to explore our present and deal with major issues such as work and alienation, a way “to talk about today, in a game of mirrors alternating distancing and approximating”[5] (Guanciale 2018: 95). As Di Paolo underlines,

In order to bring *The Working Class Goes to Paradise* to the stage [...] it was necessary to start [...] [from] an ideal slash in the screen: to see what was there beyond the story being told, and also before, and besides, and around it. The Screenwriter and the Director. The girl amazed by the vision, and the one who is bored. The militant who questions ideological orthodoxy. The journalist who raises questions. Only by taking the film apart [...] we could hear the screeching sound of two different eras coming together[6]. (2018b: 5)

Example 8

The play creates a complex network of literary and visual allusions, where intertextuality and cultural references aim at evoking the socio-political and cultural context of the story. Moreover, owing to its filmic origin, the show has a wealth of audiovisual material, starting with clips of the film that are projected.

3.2 Analysis of visual intertextual and cultural references

The richness and the variety of visual and audiovisual contents included represent a major challenge for the describer, not least because of the relationship with stage action. The audiovisual materials ranges from text on-stage (surtitles and captions) to static images (pictures and frames from the film), to videos (film excerpts, videos on the Italian socio-political context from the 1960s, excerpts of TV programmes, etc). All these different contents establish, as discussed above, a different relationship with stage action, in particular the soundtrack and dialogues. In their analysis of visual filmic allusions, Lievois and Remael (2017: 330) highlight how the interaction between the different filmic modes (visual verbal, visual non-verbal, aural verbal, aural non-verbal) results in various relations: complementarity, when the elements are interdependent and they have to be interpreted jointly to fully grasp their meaning; redundancy, which means that “the same message is conveyed through different modes” (Lievois and Remael 2017: 330), and separability, when they are autonomous or independent. This methodological approach can be applied to the analysis being carried out. A comprehensive and detailed analysis of all the audiovisual materials used in the production unfortunately exceeds the limits of this article. A few examples are given to offer a first insight and provide a starting point for future research.

When considering text on stage, *La Classe Operaia Va in Paradiso* includes surtitles, quotations, and captions giving time and setting information. Moreover, playing with its filmic origin, at the end of the first part and at the beginning of the second, captions read “Fine primo tempo” and “Inizio secondo tempo”. The font and the colour of the letters – bold white against the black backdrop – are identical to those used in the past to announce intermission in cinemas. The first part is particularly rich in superimposed texts. Before the actual start of the performance, when the audience takes their seats, a quotation by French poet Paul Valéry on the social world is displayed against the black curtain, introducing to the performance that is about to begin, while also arousing their curiosity and provoking some kind of pre-show reflection, functioning as a literary epigraph. In order to be certain that this information is fully grasped by the blind and visually impaired audience, the audio introduction contains the text of the quotation, introduced as follows:

Prima dell'inizio dello spettacolo, sul velario lasciato a vista dal sipario aperto viene proiettata una citazione di Paul Valéry.

[Before the performance begins, a quotation by Paul Valéry is displayed on the veil visible through the open curtain.]

Example 9

The information is then evoked in the dynamic AD, at the beginning of the performance:

Si spengono le luci. Buio. Al centro, in azzurro su fondo nero la citazione di Paul Valéry sul mondo sociale.

[The lights go out. Dark. At the centre, in blue letters on a black backdrop, the quotation by Paul Valéry on the social world.]

Example 10

The performance opens with a rather complex and challenging scene, rich in audiovisual contents. The prologue from *Works and Days* by Hesiod, as specified in the script (Di Paolo 2018a: 9), is recited in Greek by the actress Aglaia Pappas. And while we listen to her recorded voice in the theatre, surtitles into Italian are displayed at the top of the scene, and a video takes up the centre. In the video, a series of images of the Italian political and social history of the late twentieth century rapidly follow one another. Going back in time, from contemporary images of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea we reach the 1960s-1970s, that is when the film was made. In this whirlwind of images, not all the references are clearly or easily recognisable, even for a sighted audience. Some of them are closer in time and refer to recent events, others are more distant in time, calling into play also a time gap that can make some references unclear and unknown. We can spot, for example, journalists Bianca Berlinguer and Enzo Biagi, news events such as the Thyssen Krupp plant accident in Turin, the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, politicians such as Gianfranco Fini or Bettino Craxi, and literary and cultural figures such as Dario Fo, Giorgio Gaber, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Considering the presence of the prologue in Greek as a specific artistic choice of the director – also aimed at highlighting the deep connection with Hesiod’s text – the dynamic AD does not read aloud the Italian surtitles. The describer probably deemed important to allow the audience with visual impairments to listen to the text in Greek and enjoy it, especially for its great evocative and emotional power. The audio introduction was therefore used as a space to present the intertextual reference (see Szarkowska and Jankowska 2015; Taylor 2014; Sanz-Moreno 2019):

AI: Il prologo sarà recitato in greco dalla voce fuori campo di Aglaia Pappas e soprattitolato in italiano. Si tratta del seguente passo delle *Opere e i giorni* di Esiodo

[The prologue will be recited in Greek by the off-stage voice of Aglaia Pappas and surtitled into Italian. It consists of the following text from Hesiod’s *Works and Days*]

Example 11

The whole text is then read in the AI allowing the target audience to fully grasp the content of the quotation and its meaning in relation to the play. When the prologue starts, the dynamic AD refers to the text in Greek, using the same verb and echoing the structure of the AI (“the prologue will be recited in Greek”; “a voice begins to recite in Greek”). This reiteration thus helps the listener to recall the pre-show information:

AD: La scritta [la citazione di Valéry] svanisce, una voce inizia a recitare in greco.

[The words [Valéry’s quotation] fade away, a voice begins to recite in Greek.]

Example 12

In this rich and complex opening scene, the video uses the visual non-verbal mode to contextualise the play, while offering a key to interpretation. Moreover, the rewinding technique moving back in time builds a connection between the original context of the film and the present. However, the fast-paced montage does not allow for a detailed or precise description of the images shown in the dynamic AD. Here again, the AI is used to partially compensate for this loss, through a concise reference:

AI: Durante il prologo saranno inoltre proiettate immagini della storia sociale, politica e culturale italiana del secondo dopoguerra, in particolare a partire dagli anni Settanta.

[During the prologue, images of the Italian social, political, and cultural history after World War II, in particular from the 1970s, will also be displayed.]

Example 13

The audio introduction only hints at the video and its content. This is probably due to its density: the quantity of information is likely to be too much of a cognitive load for the listener, not least because this information needs to be processed and stored before the show starts to be retrieved later and make the connection, when the moment comes. The describer has thus most likely decided not to overload the listener. Regardless of the actual reason, the specific content of the video is largely lost and is not accessible to the audience with visual impairments.

A similar challenge is represented by the audio description of the scenes featuring the singer-storyteller, who comments on the story by playing the guitar and singing Fausto Amodei’s songs (*Il Tarlo/The Woodworm*, *La Taylorizzazione/The Taylorisation*, and *La Fanfaneide/The Fanfare of Fanfani*). These songs, a clear intertextual insertion on the original screenplay, are also brought up to date and set in the present. This is achieved by adding to the original lyrics short recitatives and new verses written from scratch that make explicit the proximity between the professional and existential dimension of the working class portrayed in the film and the equally dramatic one of contemporary workers (Guanciale 2018: 96). More importantly, during these songs, several visual and audiovisual elements pile up. With slight differences, an informative caption is projected: the first one presents the woodworm, giving some scientific information, the second introduces Taylor and the taylorisation, while the third is devoted to the Italian politician Amintore Fanfani and provides a short bio note. In addition to this superimposed text, pictures and/or videos related to the lyrics are shown. This visual content adds a further level of meaning to the play, completing and enriching the lyrics, thus also guiding the audience, providing a key for interpretation. Even though this is relevant visual information contributing to the (re)construction of the socio-historical context, due to a close dialogue, it is not possible to include a description. Hence, this rich and varied visual landscape remains inaccessible to people with visual impairments. Time constraints make omission the only possible strategy. Yet, in the scene containing the second song, a non-synchronic description of the last image (skeletons of 1970s cars hanging from industrial mechanical arms) has been included, just before it disappears.

This can be considered a sort of compensation strategy. The description also allows for the transition to the next scene featuring images and videos about factory work. Among these pictures, we find a crucial nonverbal filmic intertextual reference, namely the moment in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* when the Tramp is sucked into the gears of the machine. The reference is described without naming it (Szarkowska and Jankowska 2015), that is the AD “describe[s] the marker of the allusion, not its relation to the marked” (Lievais and Remael 2017: 337):

AD: L'immagine con gli scheletri delle auto pronte al montaggio sfuma lentamente in ingranaggi che girano. [...] Osserva meglio l'immagine alle sue spalle, un operaio stringe i bulloni tra gli ingranaggi.

[The image of the car skeletons ready to be assembled slowly fades into turning gears. [...] He takes a closer look at the image behind him, a worker tightens the bolts between the gears.]

Example 14

When audiovisual content does not overlap with dialogue, songs, or other relevant visual elements, the audio description is less challenging. This is the case with the closing scene of the film, appearing three times, or with the theme song of the popular 1970s TV programme *Rischiatutto*, for which a detailed description is provided.

4. Conclusions

All the audio descriptions analysed in this article can be considered “*ex-post* solutions” (Greco 2018: 213): the audio description has been added to the final product at a later stage and the describer has not been involved in the creation process. The challenges of describing highly complex scenes and elements such as audiovisual content, intertextuality, and cultural references illustrate how the advantages of inclusive theatre-making could be manifold. As for audio description, this means abandoning traditional AD, consisting in “a sighted describer (or describers) writing a description to share with blind audiences once a theatre production is complete and ready to be shown to an audience” (Fryer 2018a). The alternative approach is the so-called “integrated AD” (Fryer 2018a) whereby AD is conceived from the start as an integral part of a production. As shown by Fryer (2018b), the shortcomings of traditional AD have been highlighted by various stakeholders, including the artistic creative team. In this paradigm shift, the creative process is constantly enriched by mutual exchange and influence. Adopting the describer's viewpoint and considering the challenges highlighted in the analysis, integrated AD “is [...] advantageous to the describer, who is usually constrained by a fixed soundtrack, and therefore also to the user who is less likely to suffer from the AD being squeezed into too short a gap. It highlights the opportunities for flexibility of source material which is not usually possible with traditional AD” (Fryer 2018a). Involving users and accessibility experts like describers in the creation process implies freeing and unleashing creative potential, exploring new possibilities opened up by discovering new, different points of view. This creative exchange allows to overcome crucial challenges and to produce performances that are more accessible and more inclusive from the onset.

References

- Di Giovanni, Elena (2021) “Oltre l'accessibilità. I teatri inclusivi”, *Lingue e Linguaggi* 43: 15-31, URL: <http://siba-cse.unisalento.it/index.php/lingue/linguaggi/article/view/23652/19769> (accessed 10 December 2021).
- Di Paolo, Paolo (2018a) *La classe operaia va in Paradiso*, Bologna, Luca Sossella Editore.
- Di Paolo, Paolo (2018b) “Un uomo ha il diritto di sapere quello che fa... ha diritto di sapere a che cazzo serve...” in *La classe operaia va in Paradiso*, Di Paolo Paolo (ed), Bologna, Luca Sossella Editore: 5–6.
- Fryer, Louise (2018a) “Staging the Audio Describer: An Exploration of Integrated Audio Description”, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3, URL: <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/6490/5093> (accessed 27 January 2022).
- Fryer, Louise (2018b) “The Independent Audio Describer is Dead: Long Live Audio Description!”, *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* 1, no. 1: 170–86. URL: <https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v1i1.52> (accessed 27 January 2022).
- Fryer, Louise, and Amelia Cavallo (2022) *Integrated Access in Live Performance*, London, Routledge.
- Greco, Gian Maria (2018) “The nature of accessibility studies”, *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 1, no. 1: 205–32. URL: <https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v1i1.51> (accessed 10 December 2021).
- Guanciale, Lino (2018) “Mi scusi, lei fa del teatro politico?” in *La classe operaia va in Paradiso*, Di Paolo Paolo (ed), Bologna, Luca Sossella Editore: 95–97.
- Lievais, Katrien, and Aline Remael (2017) “Audio-describing visual filmic allusions”, *Perspectives* 25, no. 2, 323–39, URL: [\[url=https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2016.1213303\]](https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2016.1213303)[\[url\]](https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2016.1213303) (accessed 14 January 2022).
- Maszerowska, Anna, and Carme Mangiron (2014) “Strategies for dealing with cultural references in audio description” in *Audio description. New perspectives illustrated*, Anna Maszerowska, Anna Matamala, and Pilar Orero (eds), Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins: 159–77.
- Matamala, Anna (2014) “Audio describing text on screen” in *Audio description. New perspectives illustrated*, Anna Maszerowska, Anna Matamala, and Pilar Orero (eds), Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins: 103–20.
- Remael, Aline, Nina Reviers, and Gert Vercauteren (2015) “Introduction: Basic Audio Description concepts” in *Pictures painted in words: ADLAB Audio Description guidelines*, Aline Remael, Nina Reviers, and Gert Vercauteren (eds), Trieste, Edizioni Università di Trieste: 9–18. URL: https://www.openstarts.units.it/bitstream/10077/11838/1/ADLAB_UK.pdf (accessed 14 January 2022).
- Sanz-Moreno Raquel (2019) “How to deal with intertextuality in AD? Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In*: A case study”, in *TRAlinea* 21, URL: [\[url=https://www.intralinea.org/archive/article/2348\]](https://www.intralinea.org/archive/article/2348)[\[url\]](https://www.intralinea.org/archive/article/2348) (accessed 13 January 2022)

- Szarkowska, Agnieszka, and Anna Jankowska (2015) "Audio describing foreign films", *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 23, January 2015: 243–69.
- Taylor, Christopher (2014) "Intertextuality", in *Audio description. New perspectives illustrated*, Anna Maszerowska, Anna Matamala, and Pilar Orero (eds), Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins: 29–40.
- Taylor, Christopher (2015) "Intertextual references", in *Pictures painted in words. ADLAB Audio Description Guidelines*, Aline Remael, Nina Reviere, and Gert Vercauteren (eds), Trieste, Edizioni Università di Trieste: 42–46. URL: https://www.openstarts.units.it/bitstream/10077/11838/1/ADLAB_UK.pdf (accessed 14 January 2022).
- United Nations (2006) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, URL: [\[url=https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf\]](https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf)<https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf> (accessed 28 January 2022).
- Valero Gisbert, María (2012) "La intertextualidad filmica en la audiodescripción (AD)", *inTRAlinea* 14, URL: <http://www.intraline.org/archive/article/1889> (accessed 13 January 2021).
- Valero Gisbert, María (2020) "Referencias culturales en la audiodescripción de Nuovo Cinema Paradiso. Análisis contrastivo", *Lingue e Linguaggi* 35: 273–93, URL: <http://doi.org/10.1285/i22390359v35p273> (accessed 20 April 2022).
- WANT (2022) *Manifesto for an inclusive theatre*, URL: <https://weallneedtheatre.eu/the-campaign/> (accessed 28 January 2022).

Theatre references

- Fronte del porto*, directed by Alessandro Gassmann.
- Il silenzio grande*, directed by Alessandro Gassmann.
- La classe operaia va in paradiso*, directed by Claudio Longhi.
- Qualcuno volò sul nido del cuculo*, directed by Alessandro Gassmann.
- Ragazzi di vita*, directed by Massimo Popolizio.
- Se questo è un uomo*, directed by Walter Malosti.
- Skianto*, directed by Filippo Timi.
- When the Rain Stops Falling*, directed by Lisa Ferlazzo Natoli.

Notes

- [1] The study analyses two different Italian audio descriptions for the same film and the Spanish one.
- [2] All the performances analysed have been audio described in the project *Teatro No Limits* carried out by the Centro Diego Fabbri (since 2010). The study examines the scripts used for the live delivery of the ADs.
- [3] Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian to English are by the author.
- [4] The play has also been published as a book in the series Linea dedicated to theatre by Luca Sossella Editore (Di Paolo 2018a).
- [5] "Per parlare dei nostri giorni, in un gioco di specchi alternatamente distanziante e approssimante".
- [6] "Per portare sulla scena *La classe operaia va in paradiso* [...] bisognava partire [...] [d]a un ideale squarcio sullo schermo: per vedere cosa ci fosse di là dalla storia raccontata, e anche prima, e accanto, e intorno. Lo Sceneggiatore e il Regista. La ragazza stupita dalla visione, e quella annoiata. Il militante che s'interroga sull'ortodossia ideologica. Il giornalista che domanda. Solo smontando il film [...] avremmo potuto sentire lo stridio che fanno due epoche diverse messe a contatto".

©inTRAlinea & Valeria Illuminati (2022).

"Audio describing visual intertextuality and cultural references as a challenge towards inclusion", *inTRAlinea* Special Issue: Inclusive Theatre: Translation, Accessibility and Beyond.

Stable URL: <https://www.intraline.org/specials/article/2596>