

The Visual Made Verbal

The Visual Made Verbal

**A Comprehensive Training Manual
and Guide to the History and Applications
of Audio Description**

Joel Snyder, PhD

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND, Inc.

with Æ Academic Publishing

Text © 2014 Joel Snyder

Copyright for the English edition © 2014 American Council of the Blind

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Proof-read and reformatted by Æ Academic Publishing (with Ireneusz Świątkiewicz)

1st edition, published in 2014 by:



AMERICAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND
2200 Wilson Boulevard, #650
Arlington, VA 22201
www.acb.org

Reprinted in 2020 by:



Æ Academic Publishing
501 W. Broadway Ste A186
San Diego, CA 92101
USA

www.aeAcademicPublishing.com
contact@aeAcademicPublishing.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020915281

ISBNs: 978-1-68346-191-3 (pbk) | 978-1-68346-193-7 (ePub) | 978-1-68346-192-0 (Kindle) |
978-1-68346-194-4 (pdf)

24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JOEL SNYDER is the President of Audio Description Associates, LLC [www.audio-describe.com] and serves as the Director of the Audio Description Project at the American Council of the Blind [www.acb.org/adp]. A member of Actors' Equity Association, the American Federation of TV and Radio Artists, and the Screen Actors Guild, and a 20-year veteran of work as an arts specialist for the National Endowment for the Arts, Joel Snyder is perhaps best known

internationally as one of the first “audio describers” (c. 1981) working with theater events and media at the world’s first ongoing audio description service. Beginning in the early 1970s, he recorded “talking books” for the Library of Congress and read privately for individuals who are blind, but his abilities as a describer have made hundreds of live theater productions accessible to audience members who are blind or have a vision impairment; in media, Dr. Snyder has used the same technique to enhance PBS’ *American Playhouse* productions, ABC and FOX network broadcasts, feature films, educational videos, the IMAX film *Blue Planet* and the Planetarium show *And A Star To Steer Her By* at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum.

Under contract to the American Council of the Blind (ACB), Dr. Snyder is the founder and director of ACB’s Audio Description Project (ADP) designed to boost awareness of description in all formats throughout the United States. The ADP produced description for ABC-TV’s nationwide coverage of both of President Obama’s inaugurations as well as the description for the Arts & Entertainment Network’s biography, Barack Obama. The Project also produced description for the 30th anniversary DVD release of *The Miracle Worker* featuring Patty Duke as “Annie Sullivan.” The ADP sponsors the annual Audio Description Awards, coordinates international conferences on audio description, conducts the annual Audio Description Institute, offers the “Young Described Film Critic” contest for students who are blind (the “Listening Is Learning” initiative, sponsored in conjunction with the Described and Captioned Media Program) and maintains the ADP website, the leading resource for information on audio description in all genres.

As Director of Described Media for the National Captioning Institute, a program founded by Dr. Snyder, he led a staff that produced description for nationally broadcast films and network series including *Sesame Street* broadcasts and DVDs. He was

THE VISUAL MADE VERBAL

a member of the American Foundation for the Blind's expert panel charged with reviewing guidelines for educational multi-media description and has been a member of several media access panels at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as well as the Disability Access Committee of the International Telecommunications Union and the Description Leadership Network of the Video Description Research and Development Center.

In addition to work principally in media and audio description training, Dr. Snyder's Audio Description Associates, LLC develops audio described tours for major museums and visitor centers throughout the United States including the writing/voicing of an audio described tour of the Enabling Garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden, the National Aquarium in Baltimore, the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the Albright/Knox Gallery in Buffalo, the Salvador Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, FL, and myriad National Park Service and US Forest Service facilities. Dr. Snyder trained museum docents in audio description techniques at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and Sackler/Freer Galleries, and the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC, the Seattle Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Design and the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City. He also coached Secret Service agents/White House tour guides in AD methods and is the producer and author of the first-ever audio described tour of the White House. Dr. Snyder worked closely with the Disability Rights Committee of the Obama for America campaign in 2008, serving as a surrogate speaker on disability issues for the Obama campaign, and coordinated live audio description for the Presidential Inauguration Parades in 2009 and 2013.

Internationally, Dr. Snyder has introduced description techniques in 35 nations, most recently in Croatia, Slovenia, Israel, South Africa, Iceland, India, Taiwan, Thailand, Ireland, Poland, Hong Kong and Malaysia; he conducted audio description "master classes" in London, Prague, and St. Petersburg, Russia; and developed a team of describers for the Second Annual Moscow International Disability Film Festival as the result of intensive seminars conducted in Russia. He led described tours of Geneva and provided description for the World Blind Union General Assembly in Switzerland following the presentation of a paper on description at the International Federation of Translators' World Congress in Shanghai, China. He has trained describers in Brazil and presented papers on description in Italy at the International Conference on the Arts & Society and in Spain at the Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description.

Snyder holds a PhD from the Center for Accessibility and Ambient Intelligence at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), Barcelona, Spain.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD by William Rowland, Ph.D., former president, World Blind Union ...	ix
PREFACE by Kim Charlson, President, American Council of the Blind	xi
Acknowledgements	xiii
Audio Description Logos	xvii
Testimonials	xviii
Chapter 1 – INTRODUCTION	1
Attitudes Are The Real Disabilities	3
Seeing With Your Ears: Audio Description, A Definition	11
Chapter 2 – AUDIO DESCRIPTION: A BRIEF HISTORY (FROM PREHISTORIC TIMES TO THE PRESENT)	13
Chapter 3 –AUDIO DESCRIPTION: TRAINING THE FOUR FUNDAMENTALS	29
“I Never Noticed That ...”—Learning To See: OBSERVATION	29
What Not To Say ... And When Not To Say It: EDITING.....	33
The Words You Say: LANGUAGE.....	39
The Words You Say <i>and How You Say Them</i> : VOCAL SKILLS	47
Chapter 4 – PRACTICA	71
Exercises and Images to be Described by Trainees and Images Described by the Author (Still Images, Video, and Audio Files on Associated Web Site).....	71
Chapter 5 – AUDIO DESCRIPTION AND LITERACY: WORDS AND MOVEMENT	83
Chapter 6 – BRINGING AUDIO DESCRIPTION TO YOUR COMMUNITY	97
Chapter 7 – CONCLUSION AND FURTHER IMPLICATIONS	103

THE VISUAL MADE VERBAL

Appendix I. Audio Description Around The World and Who is Doing It	108
Appendix II. Equipment Needs and Specifications	125
1. For Live Events.....	125
2. For Media.....	125
Appendix III. Transcript of An Audio Described Film: <i>Night of the Living Dead</i>	128
Appendix IV. <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> (full movie) with audio description	128
Appendix V. Conference Proceedings from The Audio Description Project Conference of the American Council of the Blind, July 12–14, 2010, Phoenix, AZ	128
Appendix VI. Conference Proceedings from The Audio Description Project Conference of the American Council of the Blind, July 6–8, 2009, Orlando, FL....	128
Appendix VII. Conference Proceedings from The International Conference on Audio Description, March 23–24, 2002, Washington, DC	128
Appendix VIII. Conference Proceedings from The International Conference on Audio Description, June 15–17, 1995, Washington, DC	128
Appendix IX. Training	129
1. Auditions	131
2. Training Outline	132
3. Press Release	133
Appendix X. AD Scripts for a Scene from <i>Pretty Woman</i>	134
Audio Description by Royal National Institute of Blind People	134
Audio Description by WGBH	135
Audio Description by Audio Description Associates, LLC	136
Appendix XI. Further Resources Available on the Book’s Associated Website	138
Selected Bibliography	140
Joel Snyder and Audio Description Training	147
Index	152

FOREWORD

by **William Rowland, Ph.D., former president, World Blind Union**

In our day and age, pioneers of any kind are a rare species. I therefore count it an extraordinary privilege to have as a professional associate and personal friend an actual member of this exclusive club! Dr. Joel Snyder of the United States has, over a lifetime of service, perfected an exquisite technique to the point where audio description (AD) becomes an artistic endeavor capable of bringing vividly to the unseeing imagination the sadness and beauty of the world.

I first encountered Joel in 2005 at an international conference in London. Working my way through a program of over-familiar topics, I lighted upon an unexpected novelty: a presentation by Joel on AD. I entered the lecture room that afternoon with a sense of curiosity. I left an hour later an awakened advocate for the right of access to the visual media. An indelible memory of that event is an excerpt played to us from the Iranian movie *The Color of Paradise*. First Joel let us listen to a two-minute snippet in which all that could be heard was the rustling of leaves and a bird chirping. It was impossible to tell what was happening. Then Joel added the audio description and with growing amazement we followed a little blind boy climbing a tree to steal an egg from a bird's nest and slip it into his pocket. "The visual made verbal," as Joel says.

At that time, I had recently been elected President of the World Blind Union. And so, I came up with the idea of introducing an innovation at our next General Assembly—to have Joel provide audio description during our plenary sessions. In this way, blind delegates to the 2008 Assembly in Geneva were given fuller awareness of their surroundings and alerted to activities on stage and elsewhere in the hall which they would otherwise have missed. Joel also offered walking tours of the city with audio description. After that we kept in touch, with a niggling question as a recurring theme: What about audio description in my country, South Africa?

Enter Shakila Maharaj, a blind organizational psychologist from Durban. Shakila and I had forged a business partnership to research the functioning of disability units at our universities and gone on to design a voting template for our 2009 general election. Joel's prompting and our confidence in each other became the catalyst for our next and biggest venture, the founding of AudioDescribe (Pty) Ltd and the launching of our first AD project.

It began in October 2012 with AD training workshops presented by Joel in Durban, Cape Town, and Johannesburg. These events were enthusiastically attended by professionals from public and private media including filmmakers, parks and museums,

THE VISUAL MADE VERBAL

the Writers' Guild of South Africa, and private individuals. As I write, our first proposal for the introduction of AD at local museums and galleries is being formulated, while audio-described tours in the Kruger National Park—one of Africa's largest wild-life sanctuaries—are about to become a reality.

Joel has been our inspiration and a generous contributor of skills and advice. It is an honor for me to commend his work to a global audience via his long-awaited book and to acknowledge with gratitude his pioneering work carried out over three decades in many settings around the world. With Joel as guide, blind people have crossed seemingly impenetrable frontiers to new realms of knowledge and enjoyment.

PREFACE

Quality Access to Culture

Kim Charlson, President, American Council of the Blind

“What’s happening now?” is the proverbial question whispered by a blind or visually impaired person at a cultural event. Enjoying the experience while being compelled to rely on the description of a friend or family member has made attending cultural events less than a satisfying experience. The ultimate hope may be that the plot be understandable and heavy on the dialogue.

Cultural activities are an important element of our society, often expressing values, trends, fads, historical perspectives, or future directions. People who are blind or visually impaired want and need to be a part of society in all its aspects. Audio description provides the means for blind or visually impaired people to have full and equal participation in cultural life, accessibility to an event, and the right to be first-class citizens. In short, the ability to contribute to, participate in, and enjoy the treasures that society offers.

Hopefully, the description is a vividly written, detailed explanation of what is happening so that interpretation can be left up to the blind audience member, just as it is left up to a sighted person. It provides a fully accessible performance and places the blind audience member in an equal position to discuss the event, how it ended, and what happened in its various parts.

Audio description allows for the ultimate decision as to whether they liked the event to be made by the blind person. Audio description is truly the key to providing accessible experiences for blind or visually impaired individuals. The blindness community has experienced access and is certainly ready for more cultural access opportunities with audio description in the future. It can be done!

Equal access should not be considered a luxury but rather an opportunity to broaden and reach out to a new audience who wants to attend events and will return time and time again. Audio description gives blind audience members the freedom to attend an event and not rely on others to tell them “what’s happening.”

Finally, I believe that it is critical for experts in the field to work closely with knowledgeable users of description to establish training opportunities and guidelines/best practices for audio description as it occurs in a broad range of formats: television/film/DVDs/downloads, performing arts, visual art and other areas.

Consequently, ACB is proud to offer this publication, and the wealth of information it contains, for the broader development of the audio description field into the future.

For Esther and Emerie

My love and respect for them is... indescribable.

Acknowledgements

This book was developed in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the doctorate degree from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain, with Dra. Pilar Orero as Supervisor.

Many people have contributed to my understanding of audio description, my development as a trainer of describers, my appreciation of the needs of people who are blind, and my growth as a person who can contribute to our culture and access to the arts. First and foremost, my family: my loving and supportive wife and daughter—Esther Geiger, a Certified Movement Analyst and proficient observer of movement (and the human condition), and Emerie Geiger Snyder, an accomplished actor and director (director of the short film *WALLS*, the only accepted entry to the 2008 European International Film Festival to include subtitles for the hard-of-hearing and audio description in French and English); my siblings—the late Elaine Hodges, an internationally renowned natural science illustrator; Dr. Solomon H. Snyder, Director of the Solomon H. Snyder Department of Neuroscience, known world-wide as the discoverer of “endorphins” and opiate receptor sites but less well-known as a brilliant classical guitarist; Carolyn Snyder, a caring nurse, sign-interpreter and my inspiration for a career in theater, and Irv Snyder, a sensitive psychiatric social worker (and a mean banjo-picker!); my niece, Jessica Snyder: webmistress extraordinaire for her expert crafting of this document’s associated web site; and my sisters-in-law Joan Geiger and Sarah Geiger.

Close friends have taught me a great deal and have been a valuable source of support: describer and editor Teddy Primack; good buddy and NEA colleague, Dr. Gary Larson; Kelsey Marshall, the former Director of Accessibility at the John F. Kennedy Center; the late Barry Levine, President of Audio Description International which later became the American Council of the Blind’s (ACB) Audio Description Project (ADP); and Marty Price, the administrator for my course in audio description at Montgomery College.

My professional colleagues at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and in the field of description have also been a tremendous influence on my work:

- Dr. Pilar Orero and Dr. Anna Matamala;
- Kim Charlson, Chris Gray, Melanie Brunson, Esq., Charlie Crawford, Paul Edwards, Mike Duke, Marlaina Lieberg, Berl and Denise Colley, all valued members of the American Council of the Blind;
- the late Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl and former volunteer coordinator, Nancy Knauss, The Metropolitan Washington Ear;

THE VISUAL MADE VERBAL

- Bill and Barbie Parks, Tammy Cornelious, James Anton, and Micah Fitzkee, Dominion Post;
- Chet Avery, former officer, U.S. Department of Education and former board member, The Ear;
- the late Gregory Frazier and current president Margaret Hardy, AudioVision, San Francisco;
- Dr. Jorge Diaz Cintas, Imperial College, London;
- Bernd Benecke, Bayerischer Rundfunk-Fernsehen, Munich, Germany;
- the members of the TransMedia Research Group;
- Adele Hutchinson, for her expert assistance;

and many others:

- Joyce Adams, Jack Gates, and Marc Okrand, National Captioning Institute;
- Elisabeth Axel, Nina Levent, Art Beyond Sight and Art Education for the Blind, New York;
- Audley Blackburn, Carol Ewing, Blake Lindsay, Willie Barber, the Rural Institute of the University of Montana, Lisa Helen Hoffmann, and Paul Edwards who have all given of their time to consult on the development of audio described tours and various aspects of description production;
- Ray Bloomer, National Center on Accessibility, Bloomington, IN;
- Rick Boggs, The Accessible Planet and Audio Eyes;
- Fred Brack, Arts Access in North Carolina and ACB/ADP webmaster;
- Dr. Barry Cronin and Laurie Everett, WGBH;
- Kareem Dale, Esq., former Special Assistant to the President, for his support of the audio described tour of The White House and audio description of President Obama's 2008 and 2013 inaugural ceremonies;
- Judy Dixon and Ray Hagen, Library of Congress;
- Dr. Deborah Fels, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada;
- Dr. Yota Georgakopoulou, director, European Captioning Institute;
- Dr. Elaine Gerber, Montclair State University and the Society for Disability Studies;
- Joan Greening and Marcus Weisen, Royal Society of Blind People, London;
- Rick Jacobson, Nancy Von Voorhis, Andrea Day, and Mary Lou Fisher, audio describers extraordinaire;
- Rod Lathim and Neil Marcus, Access Theatre;
- Dr. Francisco Lima, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil;
- Shakila Maharaj, Durban;
- Dr. Jan-Louis Kruger, Johannesburg;
- and Jeremy Oppenheim, Cape Town, South Africa;
- Tricia McCauley and Bill Hensel, top-notch audio description voice talents;

Acknowledgements

- Dr. Josh Miele, Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Institute and director, Video Description Research and Development Center, San Francisco;
- Jesse Minkert and Joan Rabinowitz, Arts and Visually Impaired Audiences, Seattle;
- Karen Peltz-Strauss, Esq., Federal Communications Commission;
- Suzanne Richard, Open Circle Theater;
- Denise Rova, Perspectiva, Moscow, Russia;
- Dr. William Rowland, former president, World Blind Union;
- Kamal Sinclair and Adam Natale, Fractured Atlas, New York, NY;
- Judy Smith and Mollie McFarland, Axis Dance Company;
- Bill Stark, former director, Described and Captioned Media Program;
- Paula Terry, former Director of AccessAbility, National Endowment for the Arts;
- Ed Walker, former “Joy Boy”, long-time inspiration, and voicer of the audio described tour of The White House;
- Dr. Alan Woods, Ohio State University;
- Beth Ziebarth, Director of Accessibility, Smithsonian Institution;
- my many audio description clients and colleagues world-wide including: Kristinn Einarsson, Blindrafelagid, Reykjavic, Iceland;
- William Kleinbaum and Adina Tal, Nalaga’at Theater, Tel Aviv, Israel;
- Kay Ellis and Michele Hartley, National Park Service;
- Mara Dombrowski, State of Florida;
- Doug Karlovits, VITAC;
- Janet Tam, the Arts and Disability Society and Emily Chan, Hong Kong Society for the Blind;
- Rummi Seth, SASKSHAM, New Delhi, India;
- Dr. Eliana Franco, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Ouro Preto, Brazil;
- Dato’ S. Kulasegaran, Malaysian Association for the Blind, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia;
- Anne Hornsby, Roz Chalmers, and Louise Fryer, Vocal Eyes, London, UK;
- Mary Ann Diamond and John Simpson, Vision Australia;
- Harlan Milton, FOX-TV;
- David Dreispan, ABC-TV;
- Charmaine Crockett, Sharon Ige, and Fay Kiabu, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii;
- Carol Ewing, Nevada Council of the Blind, and Kae Pohe, Council of Blind Lions, Las Vegas, Nevada;
- Richard Snader, National Aquarium at Baltimore;
- James Duran, Bureau of Engraving and Printing, Ft. Worth, Texas;
- Sandra Finley, National Industries for the Blind, Alexandria, VA;
- Anna Slafer, International Spy Museum, Washington, DC;

THE VISUAL MADE VERBAL

- Jordan Stefanov, Sofia, Bulgaria;
- Ammarin Sawatwong, National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission, Bangkok, Thailand;
- Burcu Görek, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi and Engin Yilmaz, Seslibetimleme, Istanbul, Turkey;
- Alexandra Codina, Monica & David, Miami, FL;
- Karen Haner, Lassen Volcanic National Park, California;
- Dana Walker, Shout Factory, Los Angeles, CA;
- John and Rhoda Allen, Signature Communications;
- Peter Argentine, Argentine Productions;
- Karina Epperlein, Phoenix Dance, Oakland, CA;
- Jason Stark, Described and Captioned Media Program, Spartanburg, SC;
- Sandra Malmquist, Connecticut Children’s Museum, New Haven;
- Joan Lolmaugh, Clark County, Las Vegas, Nevada;
- Donald Dickey and Carol Rives, Somerset Productions;
- Mimi and Steve Smith, Amaryllis Theatre, Philadelphia, PA;
- Jack Anderson and Jake Rivera, Design and Integration, Baltimore;
- Marc Blackburn and Mandi Wick, Big Hole National Park, Wisdom, Montana;
- Deena Dray, Diamond Head Theater, Honolulu, Hawaii;
- Maria Diaz, DiCapta, Miami, FL;
- Bobbi Wailes, Nathan Leventhal, Reynold Levy, Lincoln Center of the Performing Arts, New York;
- Mike Duke, New Stage Theatre, Jackson, Mississippi;
- Stacy Ridgway, Kentucky Center of the Performing Arts, Louisville;
- Jenn Wilson, Seattle Art Museum;
- Courtney Morano, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA;
- Ron Pettit, Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines.

Thank you also to all who gave permissions for use of print and video materials.

Audio Description Logos



The “audio description” logo, above, was developed in the United States by the Graphic Artists Guild and the National Endowment for the Arts. The logo is freely available for download at:

<https://www.graphicartistsguild.org/resources/disability-access-symbols/>

Others used include:



TESTIMONIALS

“I do not know how I would do without it again.”

– an anonymous audio description enthusiast quoted in Jaclyn Packer’s and Corinne Kirchner’s *Who’s Watching: A Profile of the Blind and Visually Impaired Audience for Television and Video*

“I’m totally blind and I would just like to write to you and your hard-working staff. From the bottom of my heart thank you for making description possible. I have heard some of the wonderful work you guys have done, and it’s very well done. I’ve been explaining to my mom about your service and ... she wanted me to thank you for opening up the world of movies to her blind son. Again, thank you for really pushing description and making the mainstream media aware of it and how much it is needed for us as blind movie-goers.”

– Brandon Armstrong, Texas

“I am a blind parent of a sighted child. We watch Sesame Street almost every day and especially enjoy the programming on the days when Sesame Street contains the audio description. The descriptive component gives me an opportunity to discuss with my child the silent action that is occurring on the screen. I always enjoyed Sesame Street as a child myself, but I really find the production even more fun now that I can participate fully in the programming.

“I thought that I should write and express the importance that the audio description feature is playing in the lives of the blind. I want you to know that viewers are benefiting from such an excellent service. My daughter and I can watch Sesame Street and I am never left wondering about the action of the characters. We can both laugh along together when Big Bird is searching for Ernie and Big Bird keeps bumping into a hay stack.

With the description, I can view the show with the same information that the sighted world is receiving.”

– Karla Hudson

Introduction

In some ways, for an access technique/form of audiovisual translation that is over 30 years old as a formal practice or area of inquiry, a great deal of progress has been made. Most notably in the UK, where a mandate exists (albeit relatively modest) for description on broadcast television, significant strides have been made in developing the state of this art, for media, in performance (including sporting engagements), and for exhibitions.

But as far as the actual practice of audio description, other countries fall far behind, including my own United States, the birthplace of the technique. It is noteworthy too that practically all research in this field originates in Europe where description is considered a form of translation and studied as such. An informal survey of American graduate programs reveals no “homes” for advance study of audio description.

There is currently no comprehensive, publicly available training manual for the practice of audio description in the range of genres or formats for which description can be effective—or a guide for the training of trainers. This relates directly to research I have been conducting on description standards as they currently exist (what constitutes quality description and how can it best be taught). In addition, little exists that accurately describes the history of audio description’s development. Further, I have a special interest in certain areas: can description affect literacy? What does audio description for dance performance have in common with movement analysis?

Bernd Benecke (2004: 78) notes that audio description is “as old as sighted people telling visually impaired people about visual events happening in the world around them.” Pujol and Orero (2007: 49-60) add an interesting twist on that perspective:

While it is true that research in the field has just started, with no PhD to date, we believe we should take into consideration the many studies and range of experience which already exists, since this may shed some light on the topic and further the insight of new research.

They cite “ekphrasis” (or “ecphrasis”), “a literary figure that provides the graphic and often dramatic description of a painting, a relief or other work of art. This rhetorical phenomenon is common in the epic poems of Ancient Greece.” In *Washington*

THE VISUAL MADE VERBAL

Post review of Leonard Barkan's *Mute Poetry, Speaking Pictures*, Michael Dirda presents Barkan's definition of ekphrasis as "the verbal presentation of an object of a visual object inside a literary work." Indeed, Dirda notes that Barkan's title derives "from an ancient saying credited to Simonides of Ceos: 'Painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture.'" Dirda continues: "Think of Homer's description of the elaborately tooled shield of Achilles in *The Iliad*." A portion of Homer's work follows:

Then first he form'd the immense and solid shield;
Rich various artifice emblazed the field;
Its utmost verge a threefold circle bound;
A silver chain suspends the massy round;
Five ample plates the broad expanse compose,
And godlike labours on the surface rose.
There shone the image of the master-mind:
There earth, there heaven, there ocean he design'd;
The unwearied sun, the moon completely round;
The starry lights that heaven's high convex crown'd;
The Pleiads, Hyads, with the northern team;
And great Orion's more refulgent beam;
To which, around the axle of the sky,
The Bear, revolving, points his golden eye,
Still shines exalted on the ethereal plain,
Nor bathes his blazing forehead in the main.

I have noted that audio description as a formal process of translation and accessibility is just over 30 years old—if one counts as its genesis in the literature as the landmark 1978 Master's thesis by Gregory T. Frazier, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman: An All-audio Adaptation of the Teleplay for the Blind and Visually Handicapped*.

Since that time, the vast bulk of serious study of audio description has been in Europe as a form of "audio-visual translation." The field of study derives from/relates to a focus on subtitles for video and film. With the majority of commercial media originating in the United States of America, in English, access to this work for speakers of other languages happens via subtitling or dubbing. Audio description represents another kind of translation in media—from visual images to words for the benefit of those who have no access to the visual image. Unlike most "light dependent" people, people who are blind or have low vision speak a language that is not dependent on the visual. Consequently, audio description has been embraced as a new field of study in academic programs that encourage the exploration of audio-visual translation. (See Bibliography.)

Audio description can therefore no longer be considered in its infancy—perhaps it is in its adolescence, with new techniques on the horizon, aesthetic innovations

incorporating description within the material it supports, and broadened access to new media and varied settings for increased numbers of people who are blind or have low vision.

Attitudes Are The Real Disabilities

Who are “The Blind”? They are *not* “the blind.” They are individuals: housewives, scientists, artists, business people. They are you—or me—at some point in our lives.

The American Foundation for the Blind reports that 21.2 million Americans have vision loss; in 2007, Nigeria’s Minister of Health reported that the number of people who are blind worldwide is likely to increase to 75 million by the year 2020. While description was developed for people who are blind or visually impaired, many others may also benefit from description’s concise, objective translation of the key visual components of various art genres and social settings. Audio description is an “assistive technology”; it is meant to enhance, not replace the user’s own powers of observation.

Disability is indiscriminate and universal—and the responsibility of us all. It demands attention from us regardless of race, age, size, gender. “The blind” do not exist. They are unique individuals living with some degree of vision loss as the result of a wide range of causes. Most users of description are not totally blind; indeed, only 1–2% of the legally blind are congenitally blind (blind from birth); others are adventitiously blind or developed total blindness later in life. Most at one point had all or some of their sight and now they may have only peripheral vision, they may see only shapes, light and dark, colors, movement, shadows, blurs, or blobs—or have tunnel vision. Only 10% know Braille.

The following images will provide a glimpse at the effect of various low vision conditions (definitions from Wikipedia):



National Eye Institute, National Institute of Health